SAI BABA
Lord of the Air

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TAL BROOKE

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Preface

You are about to read one of the most powerful, explosive, and controversial books ever published in Indian publishing history. One is tempted to label it a scandal of cosmic proportions. But to say that would be to miss the point of *Lord of the Air*. Though it focuses on my access to the inner courts of Sai Baba, it also challenges the very root premises upon which Indian civilization lies and upon which Indians base their lives. Other books have hinted gently in this direction, but this book does so boldly.

This is a true account of my involvement with the greatest self-proclaimed god-man alive in India today or the world at large, Satya Sai Baba. The narrative account is unsparing in its merciless pursuit of the truth. The shocking facts I have related are true because they happened to me personally and I can attest to their veracity before the world and before the true God. Be assured that these terrible facts will leak out from other sources as well. There is no stopping them. Let me also confess that I have been unsparing and surgical in dealing with myself. I have tried to be open and transparent in unearthing my own thoughts, torments, passions, and experiences. You will see that through the process of my own wrestling with certain spiritual powers, some startling discoveries have emerged. I did not sit back as an armchair philosopher, but I cast my very soul on the bartering table of the universe. It was then that some incredible realizations hit me. They go far deeper than the mere identity of who Satya Sai Baba really is.

Rabindranath Tagore, Mahatma Gandhi and Vivekananda secretly longed for India's vindication before the world. That one day smug and affluent West would be humbled to its knees by what in the end would turn out to be the most supreme accomplishment of the nations, the very treasurehouse of the world, the spiritual diamond mine of India: Bharata's wealth of deep and subtle Vedantic treasures. That while the West chased the Will-o'-the-wisp of materialism, science and technology, India would have conquered the entire universe, finding the very metaphysical heart of the secrets of existence. And we would find, in the end, that the greatest geniuses and pioneers of history—who dwarfed all men and civilizations and rendered them trivial—were India's god-men. But here is the question: what if that secret hope, that yearning in the heart of India, has been the very root pride (*ahamkara*) that has led to Bharata's plight, tribulation, chaos, and anguish. What if that is the greatest Maya of all? What if these men who claimed to be God, or one-with-God, were not God after all? There is yet one other great perspective.

For millennia there have been cosmic principalities controlling India: they have concretized through gods and gurus. Their grip is like welded iron; through ancient tradition, through the family, through an accepted almost romantic belief in them. These powers are not mere myth, superstition, or cultural variable. They are real. And they have acted in history. But it is their origin and purpose that this book will ultimately deal with.

There are a number of reasons why I was thrust deeper into the web of Indian spirituality than almost any of you will ever go. The nobly born of India's sons are well along the Western path of education; and there are a million and one reasons why the rest of you will get no closer to Baba (to use him as an example) than a distant darshan. Few of you have that burning reason for spirituality sufficient to sell all that you own, give up all family ties and self-respect, and take the leap. The world has its grip on you, much of what the West seems to to have is still all too attractive. And besides, you too have seen the not-too-promising real life results of those who have thrown their lives at the feet of different gurus and masters. "All this may be true" you say, but not quite enough for you to believe to the degree of paying the actual price. Ironically, the ones who often do (and usually without understanding and for the wrong reasons) are those who have left the West. Indeed, there is rarely a spectacle so clownish, awkward and pathetic as a Westerner acting like an Indian and playing the guru-chela game. It is embarrassing. By his own melodramatic and endearing allegiances, such a Westerner betrays his own oblique lack of rapport with the ancient path that he is pretending to ape and posture. This is the usual caricature. But my story is a little different. I am more like you than you might think. But no matter how much or little I convince you that in so many way I have the soul, mind, and heart of an Indian and am one of those few Westerners who is fluent with the wide variance of Indian thought, one fact supersedes that issue and still stares you in the face: Namely, you may never come closer to Sai Baba than his picture in your puja room, but I have stood with him alone in the privacy of his halls and chambers and chatted and joked with him, which give me an access denied almost every Indian alive in the world today, including the very elect of the very elect Brahmin sons. So I speak with a rare perspective. And it was not entirely an accident that I ended up where I did.

In the past, from my old perspective, when I examined the entire configuration of my life through Eastern eyes, it looked like the powerful forces of destiny had put an ancient Indian soul in the Western hemisphere in order to take part in the drama of the Kali Yuga. As Ramakrishna had once told Vivekananda that he (Vivekananda) would one day appear in the West to help liberate it, I felt like a soul hurled into the modern world from the East. "How many centuries have I sat on the banks of the Ganges?" I used to ask. And why was my love for Ramakrishna so intense and spontaneous from the first moments that I saw the thick books about him by Mahendradath Gupta and Swami Saradananda? I thought that I had the answer.

From my early childhood onwards it had seemed that a great power had been trying to break across to my conscious mind. There had appeared a number of spontaneous *siddhis* that I later assumed were the stirrings of the *kundalini shakti*. Then in the mid-nineteen sixties, I was convinced, from studying every reported description, that I had experienced Nirvikalpa Samadhi in its full magnitude. My understanding of Vedanta lept. By the time the head Swami of the London Ramakrishna Math (Sri Bhavyananda, I believe) intricately cross-questioned me in Holland Park immediately before I was to leave for India, my direct knowledge was sufficient for him to say that he would write a letter recommending that I was one of the few Westerners he thought was ready for sanyas, and I was one of a handful who had comprehended the kernal of Advaita. He was also quite impressed by my access to small points of detail regarding the lives of Ramakrishna's disciples: Turiyananda, Premananda, Brahmananda, Vivekananda, and the rest.

I would later find by numerous tests of the sastris, pundits, and swamis that I had true understanding. Some said I was a "young master," or "adept." Others remained silent.

My background was greatly different from that of the typical Westerner. Again, it was the hand of fate as I saw it. I had travelled the globe as the son of a highly gifted man of letters who was also a diplomat. I had tasted numerous cultures and climes and found areas in my soul that was able to absorb them all. My family was agnostic, so I had to seek out from scratch the spiritual answers for existence.

By my later teens and university years I was back in the West absorbing that as well. And this made my perceptions complex and divided. It was the Western part of me that went through culture-shock upon arrival in India, but it was the Eastern part of me that raged at the conditions of the people—people in many ways whom I felt closer to than the inhabitants of the West. I raged at the dishonesty, corruption, squalor and tribulation that I saw. My criticism was not ever aloof or superior. It was the criticism of one family member to another; which is by for the most impassioned form of criticism compared to the withdrawn critical observations of the distant and detached observer. If the father is sold false merchandise, it is the son who rages far more than the passing onlooker. In India, I differed greatly from that so common Westerner who just wants to take a peek and then get out. I was defensive on India's behalf before my own countrymen (though honestly critical as well), and should I ever detect arrogance on the face of my countrymen in regard to India, I would assail them bitterly. You will see in this book that I have long been a scathing critic of the West. My passion has been to know the truth and all that that entails. And so we return to the accounts of this book.

There has long been an immense spiritual war going on from millennia past. It ante-dates Dharmakshetra or any earthly war. The powers and principalities within it and behind it have been of vast magnitude. And it is crucial that we find out what this conflict has been about and who is in it. May God be with.

TAL BROOKE

1

After flying from Karachi across a stretch of the Arabian sea, the plane carrying me to Delhi drifted high above the northern plains of India. Contrasting with the living blue of the sea I saw a land wrinkled with age and parched from the heat. I felt like an ant riding the shoulders of a giant. Below me, stretching from horizon to horizon, lay a dry, ancient face of sand staring back enigmatically—supposedly, out of this waste of sand and clay had risen a race of men whose inner searchings had yielded ultimate truth; without laboratories and skyscrapers, they had returned from the veil of death with a system of thought (Vedanta) that could stagger the green lands and empires of the West.

By eleven that morning of 13 October 1969, perhaps an hour or so beyond the Arabian sea, I could see the outskirts of Delhi disappearing under the brilliant wing of the plane. What distinguished mud-huts from hotels, cars from push-carts, I could not tell since I had no idea whether these tiny fragments below were huge or miniscule. Indeed, Delhi resembled a dried out wafer that had been channelled and gnawed down by wood-mites. As we went down into the wafer by spirals, I got glimpses of colour.

When the wheels hit the airstrip, the film-like quality of the flight ended. Now, as a soldier materialized suddenly into the heat of war, I realized that I had to route my own path as quickly as possible. I had no friends, no schedule, no routine, and little preparation.

No sooner had I emerged from the plane, a heat wave almost bowled me over. The air was unlike anything I had felt since Egypt, ten years back; it was as though nature had dammed it up on this side of the world, not allowing even a single drought to cross the land or sea. Unlike London's cool and familiar breeze moving among strolling people in parks, the air of India was like the dead heated air inside a sun-baked sarcophagous. The effect of such intense heat was to give the atmosphere a feeling of close, lingering aberrancy; it was as if each door prized open to the mystic void had raised the temperature a few more infernal degrees.

Once I was out of customs, I waited in the reception room for a young Indian whom I had met earlier in the flight at the Damascus stopover. He was returning to his family, having been for two years at London University.

When the young Indian entered the outside lounge, I realized that the entire entourage of strange looking people who had been bobbing and chasing around in the lobby, must have been his family. And it frightened me. As I was thinking of ways to bow out of the scene politely, the young Indian pointed over to me, and that was it. The weired group was on its way, aglow with smiles.

In pungent clouds, they pressed into me in a tight circle. I was immediately bedecked from all sides with flower garlands. I would have been hot as blazes wearing only a bathing suit. But hemmed in by this crowd, and wearing a sweater, a tweed coat and a tie to boot. I felt as if I were in a waiting-room outside the gates of hell. Sweat soaked my garments. As craned my neck to make sure my luggage was still by the wall, what looked like the chief of the tribe threw something over my head that I had hoped he wouldn't. It was a giant metal tinsel wreath, tombstone size, that hehe ld almost threateningly. I thought I had made my point to him the way I had been eyeing the thing, but he seemed oblivious.

I transmitted amazing hostility to the chief in order to avoid this coming torment. He stood back, gave me a dazed smile, and lifted the thing back over my head. As he did this, I got a closer glimpse of him and spotted some of the specific things about him that had been troubling me.

The chief was larger and more arresting in appearance than others. None of the dishevelled clothes he wore fit, and like all western things made in India, they had glaring flaws. The effect was clownish. This extra terrestrial quality about him derived from his bowling-pin shape and the lizard-like proportions of his face. The face, in turn, was covered with a white opaque powder giving his face an off-greenish caste. Running down his forehead were two fine red lines that joined and continued down his nose. Between the lines in the center of his forehead was also a large blood-plasma-red dot. As he stared at me with bulging expressionless eyes, I located his most arresting feature. He was rolling his giant mouth around, chewing some kind of substance that looked like bits and pieces of whatever creature may have happened to scurry by him. His teeth, gums, mouth, and lips were crimson.

This face finally spoke, and after that, the others chimed in, assaulting me with a barrage of silly questions that I learned later was a standard procedure for any foreigner.

The whole crowd raced me outside the airport where five black taxis waited. Twelve of us piled into the first car, including the guest of honor and his father. The rest swarmed the other taxis. I sat next to the driver, and felt as though I was being squeezed up through the ceiling. The son and his father were in the back seat fused together with an assortment of heads and arms.

Our car led the procession at breakneck pace down incredible little roads and lanes. From that point on my attention was wrapped in awe at the scenery. To my amazement, the passengers started asking me questions, ignoring their long parted relative.

We flashed down mazes of little roads through occasional patches of countryside. We were going from Palam airport to old Delhi, bypassing as much of New Delhi as possible by sticking to the suburbs. Some of the areas must have been extremely old, perhaps even ancient villages that had been overtaken by the sprawling mass of New Delhi, and now incorporated into the diverse character of the city. Contrasted with these primitive huts and adobe house were the new constructions going up right beside them. The net effect of grafting New Delhi upon ancient India was perhaps the most peculiar anomaly that I had ever seen, like the final campaign of an architectural madman.

In this hazy post-monsoon season of October, the afternoon sky took on a peculiar smoky glazing that seemed to burnish everything in sight. This gave things a certain other worldly quality. Yet the vividness of the experience jarred me time and again.

For forty minutes, the car raced through nether worlds. My reaction was to look for something familiar, I had heard about the sheer numbers of people in India, but now faced with it on the road, I knew that I was unprepared for what I saw. Like a slow-motion replay, streams and processions of people drifted up and down the road. Some were so dark that they were almost blue black, and all were emaciated and worn down to a nub. Many almost naked, some practically choked by their tribal ornaments, and some painted and striped, they walked barefooted on the scorching road across occasional rivulets of semifluid tar. The feeling hit me time and again as I looked into their faces, that a great fear was in each of them. Not that it was always evident, but it sat beneath the surface waiting to emerge in moments of quiet.

In fifteen minutes, we must have passed by ten thousand gaunt faces. Where did they go at night? Did they all stop in their tracks at sunset and, like June bugs, curl up in mud holes and heaps of refuge where the night world would scurry over them? And if they fell down in the noon-day sun, did the procession just stroll over them as they were glued to the road in puddles of tar?

All over the landscape were small fires, glowing coals, and things going up in smoke. Acrid mixtures of odour filtered in through the window. Tar and oil-soaked rags burnt while fires smouldered beneath metal drums. Blended with this came various kinds of smell of other burning things, amongst them, dried cow dung. And then there were odd human smells. And when we passed open sewage canals, a putrid odour fllled the air to contaminate everything.

Because of disease, the Indians battled as much with the inner enemy as they did with the outer enemy; or nature gone mad. While they starved and burned on the outside, parasites gnawed from within, so that they hung on the very edges of life itself from birth until death. I felt that they had been cheated. This aberration of nature, which was theirs, had made it impossible for them to have even once inhaled a breath of fresh air, drunk from a fresh stream, or for that matter, eaten in the festive abundance of a thankgiving dinner. It was as though their land held a curse.

The new constructions sprouting along the road became commentaries on India's present physiology. Four months prior, in July, when I was in Spain's Costa Brava, I thought that I had seen the worst civilization could offer in terms of holiday resort skyscrapers. The plaster cracked before the buildings were done, water seeped through the walls, the exterior paint washed away in the rain, and in about three years, the "luxury flats" would be slum tenements. By three years' time, half the pipes would burst and clog with minerals, much of the plaster would crumble, and most of the electrical wiring would no longer work. By then, deep rivets and cracks would run along the outside walls of these Spanish oceanside skyscrapers until they ran the length of the building and steel beams protruded. It would take little more than a fire-cracker placed strategically to get the entire wall to fall apart leaving the building open like a doll's house.

Yet, compared to these new constructions going up along India's highways, the Spanish resorts were bastions of immortal rock. In contrast, they looked like Versailles, and had the indomitable strength of the Parthenon or the Great Pyramids. I wondered how the Indian buildings were even able to stand. Just then, a passenger in the back seat asked me if the buildings in America were really much better. I told him a little better, wondering what India's worst would be like if this was India's best.

The outer scaffoldings were logs tied together with rope, like crude tinker toys. While handmade cinder-blocks were cemented in place with a mixture of mud and a trace of cement powder. The result was an array of buildings that leaned every way, resembling a work of modern cubism.

Another thing occurred to me. That many of the painted zombies along the road were the builders of these eyesores The workmen stumbled around in the burning sun with cankers on their feet, carrying stones and cinder-blocks. I wondered how much mileage each got per handful of rice. Their construction was like the desperate struggle of a wounded soldier realigning the sand-bags of his bombed-out trench. How could there be artistry or beauty here? By what rationale was Delhi modernizing? Was it not in pursuit of some illusion by which India could walk into the drawing rooms of the western nations, and have problems in common with them, problems in mega-technology. Yet the fuel for this illusion of modernity is india's dying men who construct symbols of affluence on a stark desert.

Down the road, I saw four men teeter and sway as they tried to carry a large stone across a gangplank onto the upper storey of a building. The children around the base of the building stared up vacantly.

The car swung out of the suburbs towards the heart of old Delhi, the twin of New Delhi. After a mile we stopped in a main street, that resembled a back ally theives market in Cairo. A crowd immediately gathered around our car and stared in vacantly. The host told me that they were stopping for cokes at a family-owned store to celebrate my coming. When they told me that the slipshod little stall was a chemist shop, I became depressed, I felt even worse when I saw how the cokes were refrigerated, in an oil drum outside the store. As they were lifted out, the bottles dripped a brownish liquid.

I resolved to remain with them as briefly as possible, no matter how blunt I would have to be. Contemplating the brown liquid, I wondered what gave it its colouration. I could just see it used in a Peace Corps seminar on "Death in Asia." They would fly back a specimen in vial, subject it to microphotography, blow it up on some huge auditorium screen at a convention, and almost wail in dread while the speaker muttered something about "the genuine death experience."

In minutes, we stopped next to one of many public dumps. It lay in an open space between some buildings. The relative's home, an apartment building, was down a filthy dirt-path, where I followed a little boy appointed as my guide. He scurried ahead, assuring me in pidgin English that the other people would be bringing my suitcases.

As it turned out, the home of this smartly dressed fellow whom I had met at the Damascus airport was not in the intriguing oriental gardens that I had pictured, but up a dark crusty flight of stairs where the smell of urine clung to the walls. Soon I would leave. With their help, I hailed a cab. The cab sped towards New Delhi.

The late afternoon air of old Delhi smelled like sugar syrup, rose perfume, and cow dung. We entered the heart of it, moving down past the Red Fort and the Super Bazar. We whirled past beggars, cripples, street-sellers, abandoned children among the masses of people. The road itsef was a sensory overload consisting of scrambling people, herds of bicyles, cows, cars, motorscooters, taxis, and auto-rickshaws.

The driver bobbed and weaved at such a high speed and so haphazardly that on about twenty occasions I was positive that we had maimed someone. Finally I yelled at him loud enough to make him jump. He flapped his hands and sped on babbling for a while about "if a man has an accident, it is his *karma* only." He quietened down after each refrain as though it was a routine that no longer required the use of his mind. Soon we entered New Delhi.

Yet even with a new westernized veneer, New Delhi still contained a basic seediness of character. New as much of it was, nothing seemed to keep the process of disintegration in check. Behind even the most freshly whitewashed hotels and buildings loomed this feeling of decay. There was a quality about Delhi that no amount of westernization could hide, and yet I could not quite put my finger on it. Perhaps it was more than simply a common attitude of the Indians or their way of life. Perhaps I was sensing a wholely different reality hanging in the air—a philosophic entity that coloured and infused everything in its realm. I suspected that this feeling was the thing that was really bothering me, and not the strange sights and sounds.

As we went off Connaught Circus to Parliament Street, I wondered if it would be possible to objectify this discernment by juggling things around—say spray-paint a sector with polyurethane, or bulldoze it flat, or transplant an acre of buildings from Prague or Brooklyn or Los Angeles to see if the philosophic entity still lurked behind the settings.

The cab abruptly stopped at what my guide assured me was the best bargain in New Delhi, the YMCA. It reminded me of a modern hotel with its plate glass windows, air-conditioning, terraces, five stories, pavillions, rear courtyard, and a large modern restaurant. I could hardly wait for a cold shower and a bed in an air-conditioned room. Perhaps after two days of sleep I could handle India, but for now the chaos and heat had worn me down.

At the desk, as I was licking my chops in anticipation of the bargain of the decade (it was India after all) the clerk informed me that the minimum price for a single room was forty-five rupees without meals. Seven bucks was higher than the YMCA in

New York city. I could feel a slow rage coming on that I wanted to direct at the hidden enemy who had been juggling everything askew, and shaking apart every pathway that I tried to put my foot on since I'd landed.

Suddenly I despised the place and the skinny little demon behind the desk with his sickly condescending Parisian-*Matre' D-at-Lawsseres* look. I knew that with the most serene and urbane expressions, these Indians were asking foreigners prices which violated their whole private sense of proportion; prices that would have staggered and infuriated them. And they had learned to do it coolly, as though it was to be expected; they knew that such rates were a drop in the bucket to Americans.

I gripped the counter so hard that the wood began to crack as I stared into his eyes. As my pupils dilated, the little smiling demon began to waver and fade. My adrenalin was summoning an archetype as alien to his people as the mysteries of the Himalayan night were to mine. As opposed to the cards and enigmas up his own cultural sleeve, he was blind to the few cards that I might have brought from down-home places he had neither sensed nor seen any no more than he had been to a Saturday night stock car race down the side streets of Los Angeles or a hell ride on the motorcycle outside of San Bernadino.

When something in him broke, I told him in a controlled tone that his prices were higher than in New York city, and that there was something fundamentally wrong with the thinking of his staff and management. He nodded appeasingly and I stared at him just a fraction harder before leaving.

In the haze of Connaught Circle, through crowds and pavement-sellers, I managed to get my bags from the cab and up the steps of Hotel Continental, a dilapidated old British hotel. I was moving in no matter what. I had been awake for days.

The heat of the seedy little room made sleep impossible. All I could do, as noises and smells filtered through the walls, was roll back and forth in bed. The voice of Bill Buckley, who did "the Naz" rolled through my mind saying, ". . .And if you go off to some place. . . and you get there and can't get back then there you jolly well are, aren't you!"

The room was so humid that it was like floating on a cork in a thermos bottle of hot bouillon. A life-saver would have melted on a table in about three minutes. Not only that, but what must have once been a good bed now sank right down to the floor like a hammock and if you tried to lie on your side or your stomatch, it was like a sustained yogic posture on a bed of nails because the springs came through the mattress like burs, and made such a loud noise that they sounded like the day shift at an iron foundry.

I watched the large blades of the ceiling fan spin around, and soon noticed the road map of cracks networked across the whole ceiling and down the walls. I also noticed fleeting movements at the periphery of my vision. When I moved my eyes to catch the fluttering, it stopped. Suddenly from nowhere, I saw the source of the movement. Fluttering again, then freezing, I saw a large lizard. It ran along the ceiling with as much ease as most creatures move along the ground. I pictured it losing its grip at night right above my head, falling on my face, or worse, in my open mouth, where it might flutter for a while and leave an amputated tail to dance on my epiglottis.

Dismissing this last horror, I decided to pursue the movements of the lizards across the ceiling, down a wall and over to another, disappearing, perhaps it had meaning to its existence, perhaps it had none—to he sure it would never know. It just went on without the thought of not going on. And then I grew objective and analytical interested in how it would get from one point to another over various cracks and barriers.

The movements of the creature across the ceiling and walls became a battlefield of forces on a miniature scale. It was no longer so much a lizard as it was a symbol of a conscious force putting its life on the line for fulfilment, whether this be a small fly or the logistics of getting from the cellar to the third floor via an intersurface. I lay there in a growing abstraction in which the noises and smells of New Delhi seemed to vanish, and the scene above my head became a haze of crazy patterns. It began to dawn upon me that these hazy enigmatic patterns were a representation of myself, working through different paths and obstacles towards some sort of incredible goal. Somewhere on the map, be it far or near my destiny, was my present location, where I now lay alone, staring up at the ceiling of an old British hotel in New Delhi. I began to trace the forces and events that brought me to India.

2

As I lay in my hotel room eyeing the ceiling, I was riddled with self-doubt. The culture-shock I was experiencing began to make me feel empty. I began to question things that I was so certain of when I boarded the plane in London. Now I was looking for almost any excuse to fly back out of India the very next day. And this fact alone was humiliating to a core of beliefs that I would have, and in a sense had, staked my life on. I had to search my mind and soul now to salvage the trip and those beliefs that spurred it on.

Enervated by heat and fatigue, I was mulling over my life as it seemed to unravel in the cracks above me, and as it came to life in that lizard that darted, then froze. I chose to view the more arterial cracks as representative of the major experiences that brought me now where I was. These I could follow. But for the present, comprehending the fine lines was nearly impossible. In essence, I had come to India with the impassioned intent of reaching the highest goal that the mystics, yogis, and so-called illumined seers and religious masters had supposedly attained and spoken about: "Enlightenment, Samadhi, Nirvana, Moksha, Cosmic Consciousness," all the names of unity and oneness with god—that bliss state of knowing "the Supreme Self." The teaching of Vedanta was, "The inner, highest self, is the true identity, and that is none other than the highest godhead." It was a promise that paled anything that this world seemed to offer.

If a chose to say, "I am god," in Sanskrit (*Aham Brahmasmi* or *Tatvamasi*), full of esoteric phraseology, using the name of "Brahman" or "Overmind" for god, then the little ripple in my conscience wasn't too bad. If the definition for god began to drift more to the Biblical God, I was not so sure I could pull it off. A nervous afterthought lurked in my mind hinting of the event between eve and the serpent. Did he not promise her godhood through the vehicle of higher knowledge? It was a chilling thought; the basis of the teachings of Krishna was the nemesis of the teachings of Christ, if you took the Bible on a literal level.

I had to look deeper into my past to reassure myself. Suddenly the lizard lunged into a hole, my mind came out on the other side in the spring of 1966. A friend and I were on our motorcycles. We crossed memorial bridge into Virginia. Soon we plunged down abandoned highways, through forgotten towns and villages into a part of Virginia I had never seen, nor have seen since. The grocery stores and houses we passed seemed to have popped out of the 19th century. Evidently we had entered another time zone; even the roadside leaves sat as though they had not been moved in fifty years.

The rains that had covered the Atlantic seaboard for the past few days left the air crisp and clean. In the late afternoon, mists sprang from the ground lacing the forests and roads with mystery.

In the twilight, we passed down an archway of eight foot hedges. After a maze of rivers, paths and hills, we turned on our lights and entered an abandoned farm. The farmhouse sat alone, and we passed it towards a neighbouring meadow. We parked in a distant field and laid our sleeping bags against a giant old oak that rose into the sky, its branches like tremendous ganglia. The fog cleared almost immediately as the stars popped into view, one after another, through the branches of the black tree above us. Neither the sun nor the moon was present, only the stars which stretched across the cool sky like burning jewels.

Our purpose was to take the largest dose of LSD 25 neither of us had ever heard or known of anyone taking three thousand micrograms or ten times the standard dosage. But before we took it, we followed the recommended procedure of "coming to terms with one's past" at the base of the tree. At midnight the pills would go down.

As I lay in the Delhi hotel room, I now reflected back to that point of reflection, at the base of the old oak, for it was during this time and the consequent "trip" that my life changed.

In the spring of 1966, I was not sure whether I believed in god or not, but with a life that seemed bankrupt of meaning, I was serious enough about finding the truth to feel like the Zen ascetic turning his face against the elements. I was willing to do almost anything to find the truth. In contemporary America; it seemed that only a minuscule percentage of the populace even bothered about such things. Our world, in the midst of the Vietnam War, seemed in the throes of a huge identity crisis.

The people who lived their lives in shopping plazas certainly did not know the answers. Our piddling fifty years sped by in an unexamined life of trivia, junk food, and contrived dramas to lend significance to life where there was none. God was declared dead. People looked the other way when existential absurdity and black humour reared its ugly head. Meanwhile we spent our "off hours" watching the TV in a cubicle amidst people we could do little more than emotionally tolerate, we were neither loved nor able to love, so we got through with emotional shorthand and game-playing. That something was lacking in our world, that much I did know. But where were the answers? Mankinds' institutes of learning?, some anonymous band of mystics?, LSD 25?

I had looked to psychiatry having the answer. Then one day it got out; my psychiatrist really didn't know the answer. Like everybody else, he had "copped out" of the real question, and made little concessions here and there, lying to himself when convenient, to make things work. What he was left with was a sort of closed off bottle of the eternal present where he simply did not allow himself to think about the future or ultimate issues. Whether he was reading some obscure Spanish poet, riding his motorcycle, or sailing his yacht, something gnawed away in the back of his mind. He knew it, and finally I became sensitized enough to know it. When he confided that his demands on life were not so ambitious as to include the spiritual, that he was content merely to be holding a glass of brandy on the open seas, I knew that he had successfully amputated a whole side of his nature. He was the logical positivist whose system almost fit together, and when loose ends started flapping in the way, rather than face the truth, he was too old and tired, and too proud of his neat system of learning, so he looked the other way.

Sometimes as a child, I had to be convinced of the importance of school before I would bother tying my shoe-laces. Things were still not much different. Why sell out to the sheerly professional unexamined life of today, that a medium-range computer in an insurance company can chart within a bell-shaped curve in fractions of a second?

So in a surge of autonomous optimism, I left my psychiatrist. Mysticism and LSD seemed to be the doorway that I was looking for. This doorway declared that the truth of all things was hidden deep within the recesses of the soul and mind of man, and something special had to plunge deep within and bring it out; part of this process was the gradual awakening that came from clues already in this world pointing to the source within. Carlos Castaneda would soon reveal his sojourn along this path . . . the thoughtless, occult, rhythm of the cosmos. And, of course, Timothy Leary had advocated LSD.

Walking to the beat of a different drummer, the new mystics stated that truth lay within the subconscious annals of the race, far deeper than the noise of cement-mixers and drills. Truth, it seemed, lurked in places where the race of man had forgotten to look, and its only clue lay like a treasure in man's inner silences and lost mythologies. The new mystic was as daring and romantic as the frontiers-man of the old west. And the LSD pioneers seemed on the forefront.

The only information about psychedelics came through publications within academic channels, journals of neurophysiology and psychology, by the word of mouth, or from a few impressive monographs and published interviews. Nothing yet had really been pigeon-holed by the public media. The same quiet air of intrigue surrounded them as must have surrounded profound but hidden scientific advances in the 1940s in the field of nuclear physics at such centers as the Manhattan Project and MIT. Everybody was not an initiate; and that gave it half its magic. I felt I was being given a prophetic glimpse of an experience that might define a new world order; architectural insights, science and art might become revolutionized.

I was sold on the psychochemical approach by a monograpby by Alan Watts, *The Joyous Cosmology*, that I first read in 1963. Here was the testimony of a contemporary mystic. He did not pray in the desert, he did not fast in the wilderness, he did not stick to rigid covenants, nor was he required to spend months in isolation. Rather his meeting with god was as subdued as a New England tea party, in part because he took LSD on a farm in the country, and spent the time surveying deeply significant things in this newly altered state of consciousness. Watts was propelled perhaps by his academic learning in oriental metaphysics, for he too, like Alpert and Leary, was a Harvard professor. Watts, the explorer could record his observations to a world in waiting. In flowers and leaves lay subtle *mandalas*, behind winds blowing through fields was a joyous cosmic dance. And behind all things, asserted Watts in a characteristic statement for mystics, was an absolute consciousness; that it is all-permeating, and that it expresses itself through diversity, and yet is not that diversity.

The early LSD "trips" of the 1960s were modelled after Watts and done with reverence. People read Jung, Blake, Emerson, and Martin Buber, and then took their trip in a wooded setting. By 1967, I would learn, people were taking off in droves like hoards of lemmings. They would "O.D." (overdose) at rock festivals, or while watching a film. They would "toke up" on "panama red," and ride around chortling in packed convertibles. All awe vanished as they soared on STP, while watching Donald Duck cartoons, or tripped at the drag strip, on the Los Angeles freeways, and laundromats and super burger hangouts. Stoned people in shopping plazas were getting the cosmological eye, and could discern great nuances of truth in the most pedestrian things. The real groovers could sit at a soda-fountain all day long behind some incredible concoction and glean deep truths from the way "the cat on the other side of the counter flexed his nostrils, while sucking a limeade through a straw."

Seven months prior to the motorcycle trip to the old abandoned farm, before the era of seasoned trippers, I was walking by Tassos cafe near Dupont Circle one day. I saw a billboard posting a seminar to be given by Leary and Alpert, the world ambassadors of LSD, who were to preach their version of the gospel at the Unitarian Church off Columbia road.

Their manual, *The Psychedelic Experience*, I had studied since early 1965, and it seemed to go beyond Alan Watts. It was based on the Tibetan Book of the Dead, translated by Evans-Wentz, it was only geared for the "ego-deaths" and bardo experiences encountered during the drug session. They claimed that the parallels were perfect between the Mahayana Buddhism of the original book with its elaborate Tibetan symbolism and the experiences under LSD. The cover design was extremely clever—it was a hard bound print of Hevajra Buddha in ecstatic union with his Shakti, the tantric female deity equivalent to pure energy (Calcutta Museum sculpture), the kind of thing that would titillate the imagination of Cambridge, Massachussets.

In the door of the Unitarian Church, that October evening of '65, I looked and saw that the aisles were overflowing, the center floor was packed with chairs, and people were leaning against the walls and squatting on the floor. In the dim light of center stage, leaning against the podium was Tim Leary.

Leary's face creased with a strange kind of wisdom, and his voice, soothing and pensive, drew us deeper into subtleties and concepts. It was evident that Leary had found a key of terrible power and knew, with this, that the world could not remain the same. Whether through flower power or mass ecstasy, the world would be transformed, and nothing that the "straight society" did could stop the momentum of the truth that they had found. Eyes met, heads bowed, as people uttered "wow" and knew that the whole thing was happening.

"LSD does not produce the transcendent experience, it merely acts as a chemical key. It opens the mind, frees the nervous system of its ordinary patterns and structures, and in turn releases an enormous amount of awareness-energy. Understanding, describing, and intelligently using these released energies has puzzled scholars for thousands of years. Yet herein is a key to the mystery passed down for over 2,500 years, the consciousness-expansion experience, the pre-mortem death and rebirth rite. The Vedic sages knew the secret, the Eleusinian initiates knew it, the Tantrics know it. In all their esoteric writings, or road maps, they whisper the message. They have figured out the pathways and landmarks. It is possible to cut beyond ego consciousness, to tune in to neurological processes which flash through at the speed of light, and to become aware of the enormous treasury of ancient racial knowledge welded into the nucleus of every cell in the body. Psychedelics can open this door.

"Are you aware of the complexity of the human nervous system? Let me tell you a few facts, because this is truly amazing.

For us, the voyagers, the following neurological numbers take on the meaning of *mantras*. . . . The human brain receives one thousand million signals a second. . . or . . . we possess between ten and thirteen billion brain cells. . . or . . . each brain cell is connected to, on the average, 25,000 neighbouring neurons. . . which, by the way, has been estimated by some scientists, if you consider the thirteen billion and the 25,000 possibilities per neuron, to equal the estimated number of atoms in the universe, if you trace down every possible permutation of each cell. And that's mid-blowing, isn't it.

Leary paused with an amazed look on his face. His tone became confidential as he went on to share profound secrets, almost talking in whispers.

"We know that you cannot describe the ecstatic moment in static terms. Nor can you produce ecstasy from static symbol sequences. Indded, there is no need to communicate because everything is already in communication. You are plugged into the multiplex network of energy exchanges. The only communication you might need is a mantra, a prayer, or a brief syllable with a guide—who knows and is grounded beyond ego-games.

"Richard Alpert, Ralph Metzner, and I, since the Harvard IF-IF, and Castalia explorations into awareness, have become very conscious that right now there are no existent road maps or languages that totally and satisfactorily describe the psychedelic experience " Due to this, we have become very careful not to impose our own models on the experience. I shall give you an illustration.

Slouching on the podium, alert yet looking tired underneath, Leary drew up on his elbows and perched his heavily lined face on a thoughtful finger. I wondered if in all his hundreds of trips he had not somehow burned himself out. Was he siphoning off energy from what may not be an infinite source at all, but a limited god-given biological source which like a fool's gold, would show up in time?

Leary spoke in allegory. "The difficulty of charting a completely new universe of awareness for which we have no language can be compared to something far more mundane.

"Picture, in some barren primitive region of Australia, an aborigine tribe that has been completely screened off from present-day civilization. They have not seen the world beyond a twenty mile radius of their cave dwelling, they have never seen a two dimensional picture or drawing, they have never seen the wheel, or woven cloth. Their only instruments are stones, and their only garments are furs and leaves. Nothing that they have is symmetrical outside the natural symmetry. They have not even seen a truly straight line, nor metallic surface, nor glassy surface. Their language, in morphemes and phonemes, does not exceed a given vocabulary of a thousand words, and none of them has abstract meaning. Their light is the light of day and the light of the moon. None of their food is cooked, or for that matter grown, it is wild and therefore, picked and so depends fully upon the moods of the forest, and the generosity of the season. They live controlling almost nothing in the isolated wilds.

"Now presuppose the existence of a device that allows for the disintegration and simultaneous reintegration of matter, that is, a teleportation machine. Picture the savage standing alone in the woods. Next, picture his instantaneous reappearance in a totally alien universe, the very center of Manhattan, perhaps in front of the United Nations building or Rockefeller Center. And let me make an interesting footnote here, unless the savage has a stable grounding in some form of religious truth, he will experience utter terror.

"Once he is teleported back to his culture, hopefully sane. . . in a higher sense . . . then he has yet to cross the gulf of semantics to tell his tribesmen of the amazing experience. To do this, he will be required to invent a completely new language. Even this is not enough. For, even if he has catalogued memories of sensations into new words, he has still failed to understand the new sansations in their own context. Therefore his road map will be gibberish. He cannot describe the height of Rockefeller Center, for instance. Chances are his memory will be scrambled due to the fact that his nervous censor is only used to taking in a very tiny percentage of sensory input that people in a modern city are required to process. He will be in a synesthesia of car horns, sirens, construction jake hammers, juke boxes, underground subways, jets and helicopters, the rumbling of cars and the whine of a million engines. And while he hears this cacophony, he will be seeing millions of tons of glinting steel and glass; shiny metallic objects travelling at a frightening speed, coloured lights and glowing neon, coloured fountains, and foreign shapes behind windows. He will smell almost every type of sophisticated hydrocarbon. Anything from Aqua-Velva and

Channel Five, to ozone, propylene, phenylhydrazine, chewing gum, super detergents, germisols, synthetic flavours and all manner of ethers and ketones, methane and other assorted sewage gases, exhaust, and restaurant smells.

"After an LSD experience, we emerge as overwhelmed, intrigued, frightened, or as ecstatic as the savage teleported to New York. And our mission of finding a language, and creating a road map may very well be more difficult than his."

In white chinos and tennis shoes, Dr. Timothy Leary, ex-professor of Harvard University, stepped behind the podium, beyond such ego games as needing to look chic, indeed oblivious of his effect. He walked over to a control panel and touched a switch while reminding us, "The nervous system in its complexity can deceive us by rearranging and integrating sensory input; none of us experience the raw data of pure sensation until ecstasy. On a very fast level, here is how data first come to us. . . by very fast vibration." He said this with a knowing smile (perhaps conscious of the parallels with mirthful Buddhahood).

The lights in the hall went out as brilliant flashes of a stroboscope saturated the room like the light of day in intermittent pulses. The effect was disconcerting. Suddenly the room became an animated cartoon, as all flowing ceased. Abrupt and mechanical, the auditorium became a palisades park for robots. I looked and saw the entire hall dancing– head turnings, arm gestures, grimaces were jittery, like the movement of insects. The reaction of the audience was gleeful and intoxicated. In this new freedom, inhibitions were chucked out of the window for fun and games, like a birthday party for twelve-year olds. When the lights came back, the audience had broken down, and it was a very satisfied Leary that gazed out into an audience of giggles and bobbing heads. It was evident, through Leary's eyes, that due to the level of cosmic truth present, the audience's ego-facade and its static perceptions had been reduced.

Closing the session, Leary assured, "Remember that throughout human history, millions have made this voyage. A few whom we call mystics, saints, or Buddhas have made this experience endure and have communicated it to their fellow men. You must remember too that the experience is safe. At the very worst you will come back the same person you were when you started. Whether you experience heaven or hell, remember that it is the mind that creates and projects them." The psychedelic movement was becoming a quiet revolution.

At a fraction past midnight, I swallowed the capsule, unscrewed the top off my canteen, and took a large gulp of water. While I had time, I arranged everything in order at the base of the tree, knapsack, sleeping bag, flashlight, while I zipped up my motorcycle jacket, an air force bomber's jacket, to fight the cold dampness of the night air. While I had spent the past three hours reflecting, from my own philosophical contentions against the world to Leary, my friend, had fallen asleep. It seemed that fate had ordained me to go it alone, something that by most tripper's standards, even considering a quarter of the dose I had taken, would make me a local hero.

Trusting my own resilience, I accepted the fact that I was, in effect, sitting on top of an atom bomb. I theorized, after emerging from an irreversible reaction, that I would either come out on the level of Gautama Buddha or the coyote in the Roadrunner cartoon. An hour later, propped up against the base of the tree, I opened my eyes.

What looked dead was conscious, as all of creation crackled in dialogue with itself. Meanwhile my thoughts and perceptions began to fuse. Stars joined together like drops of mercury across the night sky forming multi-coloured webs—breathing and arching across the heavens, across galaxies and onto the very ground where I perched. Grains of sand, pebbles and trees, ebbed and flowed with this impersonal consciousness.

If my own consciousness was layered and branched in a million places like a Banyan tree, it was now as though the rest of my being had squeezed what was most essentially me, into the top stem of the uppermost branch. Down to the deepest root, there were a thousand astral levels at war within me, as my uppermost self was fighting to stay aloft through the aid of a million subordinate parts that were straining and tugging. Even below these, there were endless rumbles and shifts, like a subterranean city, while every archetype that I had ever encountered in former LSD trips, was presently being encountered and held at bay.

Soon I was above even the dazzling beings and demigods that were so special before. The celestial cities and realms were like the lower strata of a pyramid whose fascination I had sacrificed—things great enough to inspire the master poets and painters, I later reflected—in order to approach the level of the truly abstract, pure thought, pure knowing and pure being. If I did reach the purest state, I could diffuse like a drop of bright mercurachrome throughout the ocean of thought.

Every second that passed, one of my million parts was answering something comparable to the riddle of the sphynx to propel me on to the level of super-consciousness. A new truth came. That I, like every man, was a hierarchy of men, a living society, a kingdom and a nation, and before I became enlightened I would have to bear the weight of all truths, to encompass the total history of my nation within a fraction of time. After a thousand other thoughts, I passed on to the next level realization.

I shrank and became so small that "humbling" doesn't describe it—I became insignificant. Far less than a blade of grass that has just been given the brief consciousness to realize what it is. It might hear the voice that shakes the mountains of the worlds, "You thought you were a god and you stir only to find that you are a blade of grass lying helplessly on the forest floor—even the ants walk over you. How tiny you are. Your delusions end. Can you bear this, and yet live?"

Then the sheer jet-like force of what was happening to my mind became too great. I became a twig riding a tidal wave, and knew that all I could do was hang on for the ride. I clutched the field as though cluching the rigging of a hurricane swept deck. It seemed that something other than the drug had taken over, something supernatural perhaps.

As a force drove my mind at a speed greater than thought, I could feel something far older than I, navigating my course. I passed ten thousand cross-roads per second, and took the proper turn on each one of them. I feared that if I tried to grind down the gears at this point, I might wake up on the outer edges of the galaxy not much higher up on the phylogenic scale than a cucumber. And after all the billions of years it took me to work my way up to becoming a human being, I didn't want to blow it now, and enter a form of loneliness that was unthinkable.

My speed increased even more, as I became a diamond wedge cutting the finest possible arks, from one juncture to another. Then it occurred to me that on some level I was helping to open the doorways for the wedge. That I was being asked questions in which a correct turn could only be made by means of a totally spontaneous truthful answer. Anything else would veer me off course. Like the Day of Judgement, a lie would be impossible damnation, because there was not an atom of time to deliberate. And anything but the truth, it seemed, would have fragmented me all over the cosmos.

Immediately before I lost all grasp of language and though, I saw a doorway into a new universe. It was a pin-point of light. To fight the acceleration required to approach it was to fight the mass of the entire universe. I could not tell whether the distance within the pin-point of light was as minuscule as the angstrom units or wave measurements between atoms, or almost infinitely huge, as the distance from one side of the universe to the other.

At the barrier of the pin-point of light, I enter the eternal present. All thirteen billion brain cells within me seem to turn inside out, as though reforming into a complex and higher structure that was latent. Each cell recites one of my former names, and as a nation, I hear the thirteen billion names of my subjects who are me. Once in the pin-point, all ties with the world vanish. I enter 'the unborn'.

A caterpiller cannot experience the butterfly transition and remain a caterpillar; one structure cannot be smuggled across into the other, that is impossible. That also went for me. Thus at most, my experience could be paralleled from one universe to another, but nothing could cross the barrier.

I have never been able to summon what happened for a stretch of time after going through. Months later I assumed that I had entered into the . . . "void, also known as the clear light or the Ocean of Brahman." That I had been allowed by a gift of god to experience the highest mystical state, what the Hindus call *Nirvikalpa Samadhi.*

Before dawn I was coming down fast, yet still within a hallucinatory sea. My main object was to remind myself of the great truth I had learned, and not lose hold of its intensity. From past drug experiences I knew of the distractive irrelevance of the post-peak comedown, and how it could quickly muddy up anything before it, no matter how overpowering and brilliant it was. Therefore I preferred to go sharply from one continent to the other, and be in the world crisp and awake with a clear memory, not battling bullfrogs and hearing monsters scream in the swamps.

As the dawn broke, I chewed a thorazine tablet, the popular LSD antidote. But that didn't stave off the invasion of absurdity, indeed, I could hear what I termed "the cosmic super chuckle" well on the way.

While spitting out stems and weeds to kill the taste of the tablet, which was about the most bitter thing I had ever eaten, mocking sounds filled the air. The trees started to scream with laughter; they shuddered, flapped, and wailed with scorn.

In the harsh glare of dawn, amid an earful of gnats, I could hear squawks, quacks, screams and whistles amidst a constant babble of innuendoes and trivial conversation. It sounded like resurrection day for the social snobs of the world, and to coin a Twain phrase, the air was "all full'a tears and flapdoodle." Through the bickering, it sounded as though all the former members of the Boston social register were in opposition to the royal lords and ladies of England. Perhaps, I thought, I am tuning in to a sector of hell where this really exists. Where every self-important fool has to battle it out with armies of other "cremede la creme" for an eternity. They'll have incredible maps, charts and tables referencing genealogies and purity of family blood, cross referenced and carbon dated for authenticity. And there will be libraries of photostated family emblems, shields, ribbons, and coats of arms, and all hell will break loose over these things.

Then I saw the source of the sound. The trees, on that early spring morning in the mountains and pastures of rural Virginia, were weighed down with birds that hung like clusters of grapes, of every size, shape and colour. Quadrants within a given tree would be in opposition to other quadrants in the same tree or in other trees.

When I caught them out of the corner of my eye, the heckling began, in hoarse impersonations. "Kothmick Conchussness . . . honk honk, peck peck . . . . Kothmick Conchussness . . . honk peck . . . KOTHMICK CONCHUSSNESS????" And scornful laughter rippled from tree to tree . . . . "Don'd bee Prupostrus. . . ."

Finally I saw about five giant crows hogging an entire section of a tree, cramping the other birds. They were smoking cigars, wearing top hats, and dressed in different formal dinner jackets. Amazed at this find, I looked around and noticed that sure enough, all the other birds were rather fashionably attired, some in recent Paris fashion, others more sedate. The babbling got louder.

Within ten minutes I had blown a circuit, and was climbing the tree like a demon, stoning and shaking other trees, and finally chucking huge sticks and logs at all the trees. My friend awoke by the time I had emptied every tree in the neighbourhood, and told me later that rather than resembling a "Maha-God-possessed-whatever-it is," I looked like a werewolf, covered with twigs, drooling, and almost purple with rage.

Still feeling in shaky territory, dizzy and semi-rational, I came back to my senses and conceded that it was time to head back. I knew that were it not for the thorazine, it would have ordinarily taken me four days to reach the point of being able to ride a motorcycle.

My friend led the way, and my anger abated as the import of the experience came back. I had in some way been re-created and would never quite be the same again, almost as if my molecular configuration had shifted. There was a new freedom and a new impunity to life. Certainly physical death was no longer a threat, now that I knew something about eternity—I was part of eternity. An oil streak or not on the highway, I would proceed through planes and bodies until one day I would forever permeate everything that has ever existed or will exist. Not quite so burned out now, I began to feel mellow. Perhaps I should say cosmically mellow, whatever that is.

I tried to tell my friend about cosmic consciousness over peppered eggs and hot coffee, in some roadside cafe in the hills of backwoods redneck Virginia. "Man, this whole thing is no joke, if you even smile right now, you are betraying your fundamental nature and may forfeit an unbelievable chance." Then some Hill billy music blared out of the jukebox. So I had to start screaming at my friend on the other side of the booth. "Right now while I'm eating these eggs, there is an underlying consciousness at work inside them that makes their existence possible. I know, I've been there and that was only five hours back."

Suddenly the whole place started filling with rednecks, and it got noisier and more absurd, and we must have looked weirder and weirder, screaming about god being in the eggs . . . and the table salt. And the jukebox sound became more outrageous, Nashville hollering.

Here you're trying to talk about the most important secrets in the universe, and they roll out the worst scenery possible. Even the wall-paper had badly painted cactii, dude ranches, deformed cows, and bramble bushes. If only hours back, I reflected remorsefully, some neurological cybernetic had shifted my cortical relays and boosted my IQ to half a million to give me a mystical experience, I must be somewhere near the bottom of the rainbarrel right now. So the answer was no split before the pinball machines exploded, and before a whole crew of really sophisticated demons, dressed like true blue hominy grits-eating cow hands, appeared on the scene to yodel, howl, stare, finger triggers, and tear the place apart.

In the shimmering air of American highways, en route to Washington, D.C., we motorcycled back into civilization passing glinting chrome and neon signs in the suburbs. The mid-day sun was backing me like a reptile, and I felt dull again, and a stranger to all the truths that I knew so deeply only a few hours earlier. I knew that as soon as I returned to my room, I would sleep for three days, and slowly emerge in the quiet hum of an air-conditioner, to redigest an experience that, even if only a tenth as powerful, would still have changed my life dramatically.

3

With the cowboy cafes, country stores, glinting chrome, and hot exhaust of rural Virginia still hanging in the air of my mind, I lay in the New Delhi hotel room staring up at the ceiling fan. My doubts about India still remained. In part because I knew that I had blundered in my imaginings. My preconceptions from all the guide books were almost irrelevant to the India I was now in. And I wondered if my spiritual preconceptions were not equally divorced from reality.

After my "trip" in the summer of 1966, when I returned to the University of Virginia, things started opening up. Truth became in fleeting glances like a medieval lover in the window of a palace, sweet but remote. And the ecstasy of life was the pursuit of those rare glances as I, like an enraptured lover, would try to discern her form as she changed to more elusive guises. Truth became not only the rock-hard surface of the Bible, with the dazzling power of the parables of Christ, it was also the sublime and the beautific, and came as a cosmic lover. Like the woodwinds of Krishna in Brindavan, it dances across planes of existence, bringing all things to their source. Yet like the Universal Form that Krishna showed Arjuna on the battlefield of

Kurushetra, it was also awesome and imponderable.

That fall of 1966, expecting a revelation around every corner, I was walking down one day a section of the University library I had never examined before containing books on mysticism, Vedanta, and metaphysics. Feeling a quickening of the spirit, I eyed the shelves intently. Standing apart from the other books was a thick umber book printed in India entitled, *Sri Ramakrishna, The Great Master*, by Swami Sradananda. After flipping through its 900 pages and many photographs, I landed upon a picture of "the Master," so incandescent and blissful, I took it home.

I trusted the thick umber book above almost all other books, mainly because of its tone and the thrilling possibilities of its philosophies. Beside it sat an authority I considered without peer, that I felt it was equal to saying essentially the same thing, only with greater depth. It was an adjunct to the Bible, unfolding higher mysteries, and I assumed this was because the present age was now ready to ingest a more sophisticated spiritual food than the peasants of Judah. Could they have fathomed concepts like Ayurvedic and Tantric physiology, a science of the *hatha yogin* to gain mastery of his spiritual metamorphosis into *atma-paramatma* (impersonal godhead) from *Jivatma* (limited time space soul)?

Immersing myself in the mystical book, I decided to overlook any disagreements it might have with the Bible. When I was spiritually more mature, then I could synthesize all "apparent" differences and spot the unity between the two traditions. Of this, my intuition was certain.

Other enlightening books soon joined it on the shelf. The common denominator of all of them was that with amazing optimisms, they portrayed a universe free of any ultimate evil or absolute peril. And the seeker was prodded to march ahead fearlessly into the center of a cosmic playground.

Contrasting with the simplicity of the Bible, the path of the mystic was, in the higher esoteric systems, labyrinthine and fraught with introspective paradoxes. Yet to the seekers, such challenges magnified their own sense of achievement, exhalting in their efforts like climber on the crest of a mountain peak. To be sure, mankind at that hour would be ignorant of the incredible triumph, but to the man standing on the peak of the mountain, this would not detract from the victory one iota. The further the mystic went, pursuing his microcosmic nature, the more he would come to realize his sense of dominion over ordinary people. The more "conscious" his actions became the more they would affect the entire universe until self-realization totally abolished the difference between self and cosmos.

My bookshelves mounted with books from India's holy orders; Sivananda's, Aurobindo's, Ramana Maharishi's, Maharishi Mahesh Yogi's, and Yogananda's ashrams. Each school claimed to have the most evolved means of yogic salvation and enlightenment for the *Kala yuga* (the present age by Puranic doctrine), be it *Naad yoga* the concentration on the sound currents of the primeval *Om* within *Mantra* yoga, using a combination of the "ten thousand" names of god as a vehicle for purification; *Hatha* yoga, mechanically attuning the nervous system to transmit the high voltage of enlightenment; *Vichara Atma*, pure philosophical self inquiry into the nature of self; or any of thirty assorted systems of *Kriya*, *Raja*, or *Kundalini* yoga. LSD led to Indian mysticism, which in turn brought me to India. Yet my perplexity in the Delhi hotel room was unabated.

I reminded myself that another key axiom within Vedanta was, "Don't let outward appearances sway you from the bastion of truth within." I was still over-reacting from the trauma of culture-shock. Yet what could I trust?

I wondered if the entire mystical system was not a subtle deception in itself. The yogic antidote to doubt is, "Do not think. Do not couceptualize. Trust and relinquish your self totally to the process." Perhaps the final barrier to trust would be the abolition of that last inkling of a suspicion that such an admonition was not the cosmic mind after all, but Satan.

To dispel such insecurities I had to work through my beliefs. I was positive fundamentals could not be wrong. That God existed I would stake my life on. That God was eternal, ever present, omnipotent, I would stake my life on. That God was immanent throughout creation, thus formless, and probably impersonal, beyond time-space, I was most sure of.

I was also quite sure that all created things in the universe contained god and, in fact, were God on some fundamental level. That because of this, an immense universe drama was unfolding where god was enacting a billion parts, and that such a movement was an eternal cyclical self-revelation.

Therefore it seemed that since the universe was pure consciousness frozen into variant energy states, it took on different appearances to 'beings whose own awarenesses differed in magnitude. Enlightenment then was absolute identity with the radiant self of god, and only then did the physical universe as, we see it, disperse like a haze within the twinkling of an eye to reveal, forever and forever without end, an ocean of light.

By this same definition, "evolution" was merely a speck of this eternal consciousness working up the ephemeral scale from protozoa to superman, to rishi, through more intermediate characters than Shakespeare could have imagined, had he lived ten thousand years. Ultimately, the self became god.

The answer to my stalemate was to get out of bed, and take a walk in Delhi. Ten minutes later, I emerged into the night air of New Delhi amidst a smog of curry and spices from the jumble of sidewalk cafes and stands. Beggars and peanut-sellers still lined the pavements. Apparently my probings had not changed the nature of Delhi.

As I moved ahead, it was as though I had become radium coated in a geiger-counter society, instilling the thought I should get over the notion of ever having peace of mind on an Indian street. That it would never be like a walk in the park of Brussels, but more like being under the spotlights of World War II Munich at curfew, where every movement is indelibly recorded by a thousand searching eyes.

Cars drove on the left-hand side, so even the flow of traffic was disorienting. When a policeman would signal one lane to move, it looked like a calvary charge on the flow of pedestrians on the other side. Vespas would explode out from the front line followed closely by motorcycle-rickshaws and taxis. When they plunged into the crowd crossing the street, bobbing and weaving around them, I expected to see the road strewn with bodies. But it all seemed to work out as if by a higher law of logic, like looking down on a huge anti-hill where thousands of ants are in a constant boil, but rather than knot and tangle, the flow goes on endlessly.

Not wanting to drift too far, the first evening I stayed in the area of the huge down-town Connaught Circle, where half a mile of stores arcaded around a circular park. Near my hotel block was also a square park connected to the circle. It had a parking lot for hundreds of taxis at one end, and a modern almost Mediterranean restaurant at the other end. As I crossed the street to the square park, I looked back and saw that diagonally across from my hotel was something that was either an amusement park or a bazaar. I headed back.

It had more coloured lights than Rockefeller Center. The high wall around it was a painted muslin with a barrage of disproportionate ten foot demigods, like a madman's Disneyland. Over these chain-linked perversities blared big tinny loudspeakers. They looked like British military surplus goods from World War II, dented and banged as though forever being packed off on trains with the fair.

As I stood in line to enter, it was so noisy that I had to plug my ears. Apparently this was pop music from Indian films, called 'Bombay cinema,' a far cry from my impression of an India bathed in a rich harmony of sitars at every street corner. Within the fair, despite all the to-do outside, nothing of consequence was happening. Makeshift stalls were selling small trinkets from different Indian states, incense from Bombay, scarfs and kurtas from Varanasi, sandals, cigarettes, Coca-Cola, brightly coloured candies, bracelets and bangles, nose-rings, earrings, paintings, posters of gods, and all manner of statuettes of the Hindu pantheon. And amidst all this, bored Indians stood around either smoking *beedies* (betel-leaf cigars) or chewing away the spice-filled betel leaves that they called *paan*. One of them told me that the giant demon whose open legs formed the front gate was not a demon but the monkey creature *Hanuman* who was the mythological consort of one of India's God-men, the avatar of Ram.

As I left the fair to head back to the square, connected to the larger circular park, I saw the fifteen-foot *Hanuman* fluoresce above the fair, winking and scowling, perpetually ready to hammer a huge mace down on the people with its giant muscular arms. At the fenced off square, facing a large downtown cinema house, I stood for a long time scanning the lights of Delhi. The sounds were beginning to quiten down as most of the stores closed, and much of the crowd thinned out. People went in and out of a westernized night club near the cinema house, and then over to my far right, the bright neon lights of the American Express building glowed above the city. Under the dark arcades of the circle, were the glowing coals of peanut-sellers as well as a number of human forms stretched along the pavements. Hunched against the whitewashed pillars were the deformed silhouettes of beggars and cripples, while inside the arcades taxi-drivers pulled up and stretched their meagre bedding.

After scanning the circle, I looked over the fence in front of me, noticing something that seemed to pull my attention. Beyond the glow of hashish pipes and *beedies*, I discerned that the small group of people, though dressed as Indian peasants, were gigantic in size. Then as I took a closer look at the lightness of their features, I visualized who they were, the original trippers from Big Sur, Laguna Beach, and Los Angeles, leaving their crash-pads and geodesic communes for an Indian pilgrimage.

Now in a seedy down-town night in Delhi, sprawled out in a public park in clouds of hashish smoke, they gave off distinctly wasteland vibes. As though what they had found was such a terrifying 'bummer', their only resource was to shut it out and pretend that, whatever it was, they never saw it.

Nevertheless, they kept their cool as they passed around chillums, knowing "its all a dream" because life was a child's paradise of candy-cane gardens and lollipop boulevards. And who needs to be responsible when there are no rules and no final ultimates? Just freedom and plenty of room for truckin.

Even if their teeth crumbled and their arms atrophied like tooth-picks, they would beb their heads to the melody and clap their hands to smile at desolation in the face, like existential heroes, only to blink out in the final beat of the dance tune.

I saw what was no more than a ninety-pound frame strain. Teetering against the night lights of the cinema-house like a skeleton, I saw that it was a girl. Then bending over a sprawled body I saw her proceed to lift it, as her back faced me while she pulled at its shoulders. It didn't appear as though she had the strength to lift a small bundle of newspapers, and yet, knotting its shirt like a rope, she tugged and leaned all her weight back and jerked again and again, straining and stumbling. Finally the body managed to turn half sideways, while bracing an arm on the ground to begin a gradual process of lifting up. She stood rigid as a lamppost, as the arms of the body worked its torso up her like shimmying a tree. Finally it stood up and swayed against her, perhaps a head taller than she was, and I saw that it was a man. While balancing him, she reached down and picked up two giant black pretzels. Then as he got into the two body braces while she continued holding him, it resembled an insect dance. Apparently he was paralyzed from the waist down, and judging from the carved wooden pretzels, it had happened in India.

They entered the street light as the stoned-out chortles of their California buddies intimidated the night air. He looked like a decadent 'Jesus' with stringy blond hair, goatee, hollow eyes, and a single large brass earring. Barefooted and dirty, he wore a ripped and shredded white cloth wrapped robe-like around him, revealing two grey birdlike shoulder blades. Around his neck were Hindu prayer-beads, and tightly pressed between his fingers was a tiny smoking *beedie* that glowed against one of the braces. The girl was equally wasted, a little scared, a little defiant, holding her own, and proud of it. I would learn that there were many like them in India.

They had become obscene. It was as bad as watching a man who has to carry his stomach and intestines in a clear plastic bag that flaps over his belt buckle. Yet I wondered if the humbling fact of becoming an abomination had lessened their arrogance. Or did the pride of defiance grow like cancer.

Straining for equanimity and trying to numb the raw edges of the experience, I watched the two freaks make their way slowly across a downtown street. At a distance they pumped up and down like two rusty automobile cylinders, as his lower half dragged and swept the hot pavement like a giant paint brush till they vanished into the shadows.

By the end of three weeks, either things had changed or I had adjusted. Whatever the case, I was ready for full immersion into the vast body of India, like sliding into a scalding bath by inches and degrees.

My first jaunt, at the end of the three weeks, was to the Himalayan hill station of Rishikesh, one of the four or five most sacred places in India, famous for its hermitages, ashrams, and yogis. My companion was a Californian. He had a Sanskrit name, a pony tail, spoke English like an Indian, carried a flute, dressed like a monk, and continually reminisced about Lord Krishna.

We blasted to the huge, crusty, clamouring railway station in old Delhi at one in the morning by motorcycle-rickshaw. We raced through back alleys and slums, bouncing along cobblestone roads as our luggage bounced around in the open booth. At the railway station, we waded over bodies half asleep, pushed through crowds with our luggage over our heads.

It was hard to believe. At two in the morning, the platforms were loaded to the brim. Like all huge formerly British pre-war terminals, the old Delhi station had over eighteen platforms, two-thirds of which had long steam locomotives hissing and blasting. And the empty platforms were no less packed with people, luggage, freight, and farm animals. Our platform was halfway across the station, a good quarter mile walk, where the narrow gauge trains pointed to the mountain regions of Punjab, Simla, Kashmir, and Uttar Pradesh.

When we got to the platform, a hooting train was about to leave for a destination we did not know, since the only writing on or around the train was in Hindi. As turbaned porters flocked us grabbing at our bags, the train slowly began to move. In a small area at the base of a fifteen foot high mountain of burlap sacks, my companion threw down his luggage that I was to guard. He ran off looking for the platform official, who at that point was in an hysterical crowd of screaming Indians, and shouting louder than any of them. We still had ten seconds to do something worthy of an obstacle course at the Olympic games. Namely, with armfuls of luggage, run up and over a hill of burlap sacks, through twenty yards of solid people to a point along the train where people did not hang out of the windows like clusters of grapes. Not only that, but the way the train was moving, we would finish up near the end of the platform at full sprint right on top of the faces and heads of the fruit-sellers and beggars perched along the platform edge like birds. I gnashed my teeth and muttered, "the answer to this is a bulldozer with a jet-engine." Then my companion motioned me that there were now two trains behind schedule, and that ours would not be pulling in till three in the morning.

When we finally boarded the right train, I realized why people reserve berths three weeks in advance when riding third class, I had a narrow wooden board to lie on, perched above the seats, where the skeleton of a midget might just barely have room to turn over. And at peak hours, lying on one of these resembled being tucked on a ledge overhanging the abyss of hell. Thirty people right below me played cards all night long admist the clucking of chickens. And anytime we pulled into one of twenty-five stations, tea-sellers would pop their heads in the window to scream "Chai," giving a stupid smile every time you rolled over to give them a look of disbelief. By early morning we had gone less than a hundred miles in eight hours, and that was as far as the train would go. The next train to Rishikesh was in five more hours. So we were stuck in Hardwar, the town of the then ten-year-old Guru Maharajji, which was no more than an hour's car ride from Rishikesh.

We immediately hustled a taxi with a number of middle class Indians and roared off. After an hour's driving, I asked the driver when we would get there, while we were driving through one of the many noisy mud holes *en route*. As dust spilled in the window from some cow-packed fruit bazar, the driver, said, "This is it." I almost went into shock as the other passengers filtered out in front of a tea stall with a blaring radio. Controlling my temper, I told the driver that he would have to do better than this, and drive on till it even vaguely resembled what I had expected. He didn't understand me, but kept on, seeming to know where to go.

"So this is the timeless abode of the great yogis and meditators," I thought. And the perennial source of Vedantic inspiration. I had pictured caves, waterfalls, and forests tucked in the evergreen foothills of the Himalayas where men of vast wisdom sat in ethereal silence. I did not expect this. Why I had been led to believe that this was a spiritual magnetic pole on the earth, like a geological-cosmic leak in the universe, occupying both this world and the realm of spirit. And certainly with such a history as this place had, at least some kind of transcendental aura should infuse the area.

But Rishikesh had no such magic, and that hurt. The woodpecker, a name befitting my companion, and I were the only ones left in the taxi and beginning to wonder if there was any place worth getting out for. When we got to the famous Sivananda "Divine Life Ashrama," we got out above a chain of crusty nondescript buildings overlooking the Ganges. I was hoping that this was really a nightmare and that I would wake up any minute now. Our goal was the ashram of the famous Maharishi Mahesh Yogi.

After we passed through lines of beggars, many of which were lepers at the base of the Sivananda ashram, by the blackened press building and the ashram ayurvedic medicine stalls, we crossed the Ganges on a motorized barge. Along the other bank, we passed scores of multicoloured temples until we reached a gravel path that went up a mountain to the barbed wire-gate of the Maharishi Mahesh Yogi Ashram. This was our point of separation. They let me in, but they would not have a thing to do with the woodpecker, who was becoming increasingly hysterical.

He ranted and threatened to write the President of the United States, the United Nations, Indira Gandhi, as well as Interpol. Then he spent hours sitting hunched up at the gate, to protest their persecutions and hyprocrisies against him, to embarrass them before the world, and to hasten cosmic judgement upon them.

Once on the ashram itself, I was reminded of the more plush areas of New Delhi transposed to the mountains. By any Indian standards it was high class, and by Rishikesh standards it was like an elite country club overlooking an abyss of confusion. Here in lay a fragment of a chance that my eastern dream would leave the rubble that it had fallen into, and find some kind of a resurrected hope.

Maybe Maharishi's proselytizings and commercial ventures were justifiable in a contemporary world unreachable by any other means, I speculated. And his rock tours with the Beatles, Donovan, the Beach boys, and his later appearances with Mia Farrow, did not taint the meditative super state he had gained from meditating in a cave for twelve years.

As I sat patiently in the reception office near the gate, I looked at all the pictures and billboards of Maharishi Mahesh Yogi, on television, in San Francisco, boarding planes, and sitting in transcendental serenity. One pamphlet I read added a finishing lustre to his growing charisma, giving glimpses of his own coming of age. It stated that while he was a physics student at an Indian University, he went to one of the national holy festivals given once every twelve years, known as the *Kumbha Mela*. There amidst half a million people, most of them yogis, he met with a spiritual lighthouse, one of the four Saraswatis of India and the Pope of the northern quadrant. Maharishi was summoned as a disciple, made to give up all his attachments, and follow his master. He was given an apostolic mission by the great guru as being the eventual bridge between Vedanta and the world of technology, but only after twelve years of intensive *sadhna* in a cave where he would be the first to use the same technique that he was to teach the rest of the world. Now he was methodically fulfilling that vision, hence expansion, and hence an organization that was growing across America and Europe like spores.

One of the minor pawns was the dark-skinned yogi who ran the reception office in front of me, feet up on the desk and screaming over the telephone, he gave an occasional smile of supreme satisfaction. At first he had been bedazzling, with almost theatrical features. Shoulder length jet-black hair, deep set eyes and high cheek-bones that glistened darkly in contrast to the airy white brilliance of his gossamer robe. But now as he yelled over the phone he looked less like a young master and more like someone hired from the Calcutta underworld to act the art.

Cranking the wall-phone and flicking the dial like a one-armed-bandit, he screwed his mouth up and yelled, "Hallo, hallo. . . operator hallo, Rishikesh pharmacy." Then after a lewd smile, he would make a side comment about "no good, hippies is always smoken a hashish, comen here and makin too much troubles." When he got the pharmacy and ordered canteen supplies, he spoke in guttural tones.

After eating a fiery hot vegetarian meal with the yogi on the floor in a back room, it was now time for all of us who had gathered at the gate to finally be led into the heart of the ashram for a 'Darshan', or face to face meeting with Maharishi himself.

The house sat on a far corner of the ashram, perched on an overlook where far below glinted the Ganges and vistas of Rishikesh. The building itself was unique for India, resembling a contemporary medium-priced structure in a woodsy suburb outside of Omaha, Nebraska. Nothing stupendous by American standards, but for India it was another matter entirely. And here it reminded me of some Hugh Heffner lay-out for bachelor yogis.

The multi-windowed living room, actually the *darshan* room, like many Indian residences in the upper classes, was without furniture except for a large rug, front altar *puja* table, behind which sat an elegant chair. The rest of the residence could only be entered behind Maharishi's chair, where hung thick curtains. The table itself, covered with a rich Varanasi silk, had an arrangement of fresh flowers and several sticks of pungent incence burning. And sittting on the wall behind the chair were pictures of Maharishi's guru, the late Saraswati, as well as a few posters of himself at a recent Los Angeles *darshan.*

After forty or so Indians gathered on the floor, as close to the front as possible, Maharishi entered from behind the curtain, as the room went quiet in response to his patient hand gesture and smile, which immediately established the gulf between the enlightened man and the average person.

Throughout the session, Maharishi spoke in Hindi. I later found out that his sole contact with his fellow countrymen was through these bi-weekly public *darshans.*

Yet the meeting itself was anti-climactic. The Indians seemed bored, second guessing Maharishi's replies, but asking questions anyway, and Maharishi didn't seem particularly animated.

By the end of the meeting I was depressed. Maharishi had not given off a really noticeable aura of spiritual incandescence. I wondered if some of his public stalemates in the west, as when the Beatles publicly disassociated with him, left him with the only alternative of sitting in Rishikesh in his own fortress. At least few could judge him, while he grew fat on successive waves of zealous disciples. And like a yogic Howard Hughes, he could remain in hiding while the empire kept rolling on.

Throughout the meeting, Maharishi toyed with one flower after another, breaking off the petals as though to marvel over the exquisiteness of his own handiwork. His hair seemed brushed in some areas and dishevelled in others to create an overall effect of rugged indifference. While an almost perfect line of silver white hair cut down the center of his beard; so much did it enhance his features that it became a sore point of my suspicions. His laugh too had bothered me. Lacking the glee that it once had on recorded interviews across America and on his latest LP, it seemed deflated of force. And underneath I repeatedly sensed sadness, perhaps even a bitter irony, smuggled across and transformed into benevolence that would soon die in mid air. Behind the curtains came waves of musty air carrying wisps of ponderous flute music that seemed to weave the air with spells, yet beneath this came the haunting beseechings of an icy void.

What kept me from heading out of the ashram at the end of the meeting was a very knowing look from Maharishi. It made me reconsider some of my gut reactions, and say to myself, 'May be one day in eternity, god and I might be laughing about how a little bit of flute music almost tripped me up for another million years on the wheel of rebirths.'

By late afternoon I had explored most of the ashram; the rows of cabins near Maharishi's house for his long-term disciples, the cabins and dormitories for his three-month trainees, the large lecture hall full of modern recording equipment, where I attended that afternoon's lecture, and the large vegetarian cafeteria where I filled myself on soyabean pie, herb tea, gruel. Maharishi agreed to initiate me "free of charge", and let me attend lectures like others, saying that my enthusiasm of launching out to India alone was proof of my sincerity.

Maharishi told me to go to the front office, and that his disciple would find me a place to stay in Rishikesh, a clean quiet villa of a devotee. It turned out to be a large compound, like a Moorish villa, owned by a wealthy out-of-towner who had appointed the owner of the Rishikesh pharmacy to oversee it.

Back at the reception office, my new thrust of enthusiasm suddenly died in mid-air as the yogi behind the desk said almost mockingly, "Hey cowboy, we initiate together. Maharishi call me and tell me to fix date. I will give your *mantra* and special ceremony." I could feel my own yogic serenity boil off into a heated anger. This was the last dude I wanted initiating me. Deciding not to insult him, I waved and ran off looking for help. In five minutes, generating energy like a beacon, I ran into Maharishi's number one disciple, the thirty-five year old Canadian, Dick Britton-Foster, who looked like a combination of the Schweppes man and the Cambridge mystic. He respected my sensitivity about who should initiate me, likening it to a marriage, and offered to perform it himself under Maharishi's guidance. But only with the approval of the guru.

When I busted into Maharishi's private *darshan*, he apparently already knew about it. With a generous smile he gave me the go-ahead to have the Frenchman initiated with me in a few days, and that he would arrange for it to take place in his own private cave beneath his house.

The night before we were to be initiated, Rishikesh was ablaze with one of its major yearly festivals. All night long, loudspeakers screamed away, parades combed the streets, and fire-crackers exploded amid religious rallys and local plays. By eleven, Bernard and I gave up trying to sleep. We wandered from festivities to street corner debates between yogis from different holy orders. One of them, who looked like Little Stevie Wonder, complete with wrap-around shades and fire-engine red tunic, latched on to us till two a.m., giving us his life story with the inside word on various local gurus.

By the time we reached Nirulas' restaurant, mentioned in Fodor's Guide, as marginally acceptable and yet eight levels above any other stall in town, it looked like Jazz Festival Week at The Heavy Metal Kid Cafe, East Village. One guy looked like Bob Dylan, a group at another table resemblad the Fugs mooching off "The Mothers of Invention," another dude looked like, "The Thing From The Year Zero," but the center of attenwhile simultaneously expunging the memory thereof from every conscious being within a radius of hundred miles. He might then resume his place and begin chanting again.

The cave beneath Maharishi's house was dark except for a little flickering candle light. Built entirely of natural stones cemented together, the inside wall had an altar beneath which sat a wooden-carpeted platform rising two feet above the flagstone floor. The altar was a compartment built into the wall containing flowers, and incense, and other initiator items, iucluding fruits, flowers, and white handkerchiefs that we were told to bring.

In the dim blackness, I knelt with my eyes shut and hands on knees. Dick was slightly behind me on the elevated platform. He had apparently put on some very faint music which continued to float in from some remote corner. I tried not to use my 'conceptual mind' as I had been warned.

After a long silence, Dick recited a Sanskrit prayer in a subdued voice that resounded about the cave as though it would continue ringing in the rocks forever. Then he began a series of chants, following this with the slow repetition of a single word, "Iyengar . . . Iyengar. . . Iyengar," that though quietly spoken, still mounted in force as though to suggest a greater volume that wasn't actually there. Without a single skip in rhythm, the *mantra* went from Dick to me, as I now carried it on, somewhat puzzled over our perfect unplanned synchronization. Dick then shared his feeling that my nervous system was probably pure enough to combine *pranayama*, that is, power-breathing, occasionally with the *mantra*.

By the end of several weeks or so, after Bernard and I had meditated steadfastly every day at the prescribed hours from early down till late at night, my *mantra* had lodged itself into such a fixed tape loop, that it would reappear of its own accord at all times of day and night. Maharishi had enthusiastically queried if I was getting good results, and not wanting to seem ungracious, I replied that I was. Though in fact my mind was as noisy as ever, and the only experience that I felt might even hint of some higher consciousness occurring, as one might expect, on the bank of the Ganges beneath a tree, where for an instant I felt that I had a visual flash of the Pacific ocean while repeating the *mantra*.

When I told Dick about the experience during a routine check-up, he nodded his head knowingly. Dick told me that eventually

I would be brought to the source of all *mantras*, using my own *mantra* as a vehicle, and for that time, however long it lasted, would enter a plane of transcendental super-consciousness.

Then Dick told me that Maharishi experienced this incessantly, and I felt dubious. And then he confided that he experienced it quite often, and I felt even more dubious. And by the end of another week or so of hanging around the ashram, I felt dubious enough about the whole system to want to leave. And I was afraid that what was happening with my *mantra* was no different from amplifying any convenient insignificant sensory Will-o'-the-wisp into a cosmic supernova.

I was still no less persistent in my belief that the real—Macoy existed somewhere. I simply decided that Maharishi's followers hed been waylaid in a yogic maze. Like the vulnerable chip of bark floating down the river by reeds and bag I wondered how far I would be required to skirt down the rapids before I reached the open ocean. Certainly the prospects of combing India after this was no welcome thought.

I knew that to rationalize away the search or freeze at the sight of the spiritual desert, would invite certain ruin. I had to look on. And I felt lonely. Where were India's spiritual dynamos?

4

On the outskirts of the city of Ananthapur, well into the center of the southern tip of India, I stood in the large walled compound of a private residence. It was the evening of 15 January 1970, and no more than forty or fifty close Indian devotees were present as three limousines entered the driveway. Seated in the back seat of the main car was a figure donned in a brilliant red gown, whose hair raised up like a giant cumulus cloud of wiry black strands It was Bhagvan Sri Sathya Sai Baba, the most powerful spiritual personage in India with devotees numbering well into the millions. Claiming to be god incarnated as the world saviour, Baba was well known throughout the continent as being able to back up this claim by a profusion of miracles. His miracles, as far as I knew, distinguished him from the one or two other miracle workers throughout the world because they were unceasing, and had been known to occur on rather vast scales. As Sai Baba emerged from the car, I felt an instant shock wave of force I would be hard put to describe. Quite unlike any feeling I had ever experienced before, my near bankrupt emotional state dispersed like a faint mist that has floated through the blazing white corona of a helium arc welder.

By the time I had arrived in Ananthapur, I accepted the fact, after four months of travelling around India, that I had been defeated and that my search had reached its end. I was almost sure there was nothing to be found in India but dust and fools, making my pilgrimage to Baba nothing more than a last ditch effort. Indeed, I almost hoped it would be a failure, so that I could leave the exhausted continent and think things out all over again in some land of the living, be it British Columbia or Colorado.

If Baba was as disappointing as the other gurus, that would be the final straw, and I would leave satisfied that I had persisted in my search beyond reasonable expectation. The one thing that kept me in India this long was my dogged refusal to accept the invalidation of my beliefs, no matter how much evidence to the contrary kept rolling in. Yet I wanted to be dead certain they were wrong before letting them go.

If I scrapped Vedanta and was thrown way back to the starting position again, the ordeal that I feared most was the knowledge that my greatest corner stone, intuition, had betrayed me and could no longer be a standard. Then I would be in the limbo of wondering what reference point to trust if I could not even trust my highest mystical intuitions and promptings. Though there had always been less spectacular contrary intuitions. But these were the old run-of-the-mill puritanical rights and wrongs that kept firing tracer signals regardless of circumstance, like some vestigial intellect stuck like a doorbell on "duality."

One source of inertia that had been constant was a steady dull despair that I probably could have tolerated indefinitely. But whatever premise the despair was based on, it was brought to a head in Bombay after a series of lesser stages beginning in Calcutta and ending in Goa.

When the boat pulled into Goa, ten or so days before I went to Bombay, I was convinced I had found the ruby in the dungheap-of India, especially after sailing three hundred coastal miles of Maharashtra and much of the old Portuguese-Indian state Goa. Riding on the deck in the breezy sunshine and the temperate night, we rocked gently on the jade green of the Arabian sea, passing beaches dotted with lush palms, black fishermen, and brilliant white sand reminding me of a south sea "Typee."

But once I disembarked in Panjim, the capital, the pristine natural goddess began ro show signs of acne. For one thing, the beach was head city, the main hangout for freaks besides Kathmandu, Varanasi, and Kulu Valley, and inundated with people who 'burned' each other on one hand, and then complained about the depersonalized societies from which they came without seeing any contradiction.

Our stay in the fallen paradise ended with a frenetic rock festival, instigated by the local guru, an ex-Harlem jazz artist named Eight Fingered Eddie. It was on the Christmas eve, when the mean temperature of the night air and the sea was around eighty degrees. The five hundred participants looked like what Woodstock would have become, had it lasted for three years instead of three days. And from late afternoon onwards, processions of tribes strolled up the beach from every far corner along a two-mile stretch, emerging out of their thatched hut communes, rented cabins, tents, or VW campers, and gathering at a center point on the beach where the time would be spent gathering twigs and sticks for a giant bonfire. By dusk, several sand dunes were littered with semi-clothed people whose bodies had been painted, striped, polka-dotted, nose-ringed, long-haired or head shaven, and any combination in-between.

I came and went several times, the last time at midnight when I headed back for my cot on the beach. By then things were really "groovin" in a constant roar of Nepalese gongs, ceremonial Tibetan thigh-bone horns, guitars, violins, sitars, and top volume acid rock. As columns of red smoke billowed up into the moonlit sky from the glowing bonfire and hundreds of hashish pipes, it resembled mount Vesuvius erupting on the foul city of Pompeii.

The next day on the boat to Bombay, I got to hear the rest from two freaks who decided that that was not the answer. During the party, one group of soul brothers ransacked almost all the cabins along the beach, grabbing anything from cassette machines to passports, including the host's cabin where the music was provided. There, they made off with the entire stereo system, when everybody thought that the record was just being changed.

Meanwhile, three of the less popular Frenchmen sold scopolomine instead of LSD to several girls, then raped them, stealing their passports, and almost killing one of the girls in the ocean. By early morning the girl was found naked on the beach, unable to speak, and by late morning it had turned into a manhunt as half the beach was out for blood.

Also found that morning in a cabin at a far end of the beach were nine or ten people either dead, or completely insane. The place looked like as if hurricane had hit it, according to every report, and the blackened room was outlaid with black sulphur candles, pentagrams, strange curios, stashes of the California power-house psychedelic, STP, and several dusty volumes on sorcery and the occult. Local rumours agreed in their explanations on the major points. One, the group in the cabin had been constantly tripping for over three days without sleep. And that they had been trying to summon up and control some sizeable demonic force.

Briefly in Bombay, after Goa I stood in the huge Bombay Victoria train terminal. I spun away from the ticket window for the north-eastern regions of Bengal, and went over to the Madras booth. I knew without a doubt that my last resort was the child-like miracle worker, Sai Baba. Plans to see Krishnamurthi, the Aurobindo Ashram, and the Ramakrishna Math in Calcutta were dropped.

I had one last afternoon and evening in Bombay, Saturday night, and I decided to spend the evening changing money. I had met an Indian at the tourist office early in the afternoon, and he told me that his brother needed dollars desperately to go to an American university and would pay a very good price in rupees for them, since there was no official means of obtaining dollars in India.

I had seen this same Indian before when I ate lunch at a B-class snack bar near the YMCA where I stayed. Always wearing the same purple shirt, black pointed Italian shoes, and black stove-pipe trousers, he could have passed as a second-rate university student in India. He was a fast talker, and would often change tables several times, speaking confidentially to whoever was there, and darting his eyes about so quickly I could not tell whether he was just hyper or, unlike most Indians, had an aggressive streak.

That Saturday night at around nine, we met in the rear gardens of the fanciest hotel in town, the Taj Mahal, conveniently near the YMCA and the waterfront. My feelings were divided. Strictly speaking, I sensed that I was breaking the law. But by a more liberal interpretation, I would be helping an Indian student by virtue of a direct swap of "property," which turned out to be about double the normal exchange rate. And which, according to Time and Newsweek's table of international monetary standards, was the true value of the rupee.

Soon to part with over fifty dollars, I was nervous since this represented a good percentage of all the money I might have for some years if I were to stay in India.

On the way to the hotel, I did an instant replay in my mind of every solemn warning I had been given about money-changers, from Calcutta back alley counterfeiters, to Delhi con men who double count, palm notes, and call false police raids midway through the deal to scatter in five different directions with your money. And considering the loot by Asian standards, he might even be willing to crawl across half of Bombay's sewer tunnels on knee-pads to make enough cash for an Indian with hustle to get into the contraband market or just buy a plot of land and get married, depending upon predilection.

As these fears mounted, I was awakened to the reality of evil as being not just as an abstraction to be easily transcended, but a power as concrete and lethal as a manta ray. Then I began to feel like a goat going for slaughter.

In the rear garden of the hotel, the guy in the purple shirt squirmed in his chair as he talked to me across a small English tea-table. He stressed that the sum of rupees at stake was an amount he could not carry around, and that I would have to wait while he went to get the money from an intermediary in room 306. His voice wavered, as a trace of fear shot across his face which he subdued while mentioning that a delay could arise while his friend examined the notes for authenticity with a magnifying glass. This was the minute to pull out, screamed the witness in me. It smelt of con game a mile off. But by now I was too hooked on making the whole thing work out.

Just before he got up from the table with the envelope of notes, I stood up, reached over, and pulled it out of his hand. "How do I know I can trust you, buddy?"

He tried to remain composed but underneath was a starved street mongrel scowling at a washed, collared, pedigree German Shepherd, but nonetheless, a German Shepherd. At first looking insulted, as though I had forgotten his brother's need and had approached him instead of vice-versa, his expression changed to a testy bravado look of, "What's a big rich American like you sweating over a couple of bucks—you big pampered fools, what do you know about real back street toughness?" As he talked, he almost forgot the transaction, occasionally looking slightly bad-ass, "I wish that you had told me before that you were not really serious. This has taken a lot of trouble, and this friend is waiting up there now. This is risky for me and due to the risks, this is the way I have always done it. Besides, your traveller's cheques can be replaced." It wasn't his words that got me, it was what was coming through the punk.

As I stretched my arm back across the table to give him the envelope, I felt a blip pulse out of my eyes. In an almost psychedelic abreaction of hell-consciousness, my stare proceeded to "out-demon a demon," saying, "Now you've thought all along that I was basically a big amiable naive American hot dog who would probably whine in dread if you pulled out your rusty pen knife . . . so take a long look into these pupils, Buddy, while I open them up for you to see a few things. Don't let the force scare you, after all those slums you've been through. Just take a closer look and don't let me see you chicken out and break the gaze. Now what's this stuff about you being a bad-ass? No. It's no joke, there's something, a thing, back there called the Tennessee Mountain Spirit, and it's going to jump into your mind for a second . . . and . . . if . . . you . . . don't . . . show . . . the . . . right . . . kinds . . of . . terror . . it'll . . have . . to . . tear . . out . . your . . large . . intestine . . pull . . it . . up . . through . . your . . nose . . sinuses . . and . . out . . through . . the . . top . . of . . your . . skull . . and . . then . . over . . your . . head . . like . . a . . cellophane . . bag . . . And . . if . . you . . wimper . . once, . . it's . . going . . to . . clean . . off . . the . . membrane . . with . . turpentine . . and . . a . . wire . . brush."—A Burn Out of Silent Abyss Demon Consciousness . . . "Well, . . . bet you never thought this could come through a stare, eh?"

As he left the table, there was really terror in his eyes, and I was no longer quite the same person. I waited and waited.

Half an hour later, I was burning up with a kind of rage I had not felt in years. In an archetypal predicament, I was tied down and unable to confront the enemy. Not only had I been conned, but I was a laughing stock to many accomplices stationed around to keep an eye on me. "In fact . . . 'the dying machinery of my brain concluded as the last traces of lucidity vanished, leaving a psychic Doberman pinscher . . .' every jaded Indian in this garden knows just what happened."

And I pictured them snickering under their breaths at the big dumb animal with all the money, while I continually fidgeted, trying to hold back the rage and anxiety so as to look perfectly normal, if for no other reason than to deprive them of the pleasure of seeing me sweat it out. Yet the more I tried to hold my cool by looking reflectively up at the sky the more my face twitched and the closer to violence I was, and I was sure that this probably looked hilarious. And if one of them laughed, I'd rip his arm off and make him chew on it for a while in front of all the others, and then go on a few little friendly visits from table to table, staring silently at some of them, and giving others a neighbourly smile, while laying a meat axe on the table with a modest collection of internal organs and severed limbs.

I sat in the shadows, eyes enlarged with rage, staring up at the Bombay night that seemed to shimmer and ripple with a jet-black liquid energy. Knowing all along that he wouldn't come back, and wanting revenge almost more than the money, I knit my brows in a familiar tough expression and whistled to myself just audibly, "man . . . I should have just smashed his face before he left, phew. Now I've lost my chance and gotta stay up all night lookin for him." As much as I wanted to ransack the hotel, it wasn't quite time yet. And as little chance as there was of his returning, even that would be thwarted if he saw me hunting him down.

As I agonized through the minutes, my metabolism revying away at 9,000 rpm. Cold sweat pouring down my face. Added to my rage was an element of fear, that I had been seduced into opening the wrong spiritual door, and there was no way of telling what I had let in, or how long it would take me to stabilize The main horror was that I had lost control to the extent of allowing a baleful force within me to go into the Indian's mind like a psychic wedge, all stops pulled back, and mind dehumanized.

I got up looking for movement out of the corner of my eye. Because it boiled down to the point that if I saw a sharp movement by one of the Indian's possible scouts in the garden, I would play naive till I worked my way over to his vicinity and then absolutely take him apart from the face down in about a quarter of a second.

But no one in the garden even twitched. So I headed for the lobby, glaring forth hostility like a beacon, hoping, if nothing else, that fear would make the right person jump and bolt.

Within minutes I was on the streets, pacing the area of the Salvation Army—where they had a warning on the bulletin board about an Australian and an Indian masquerading as money-changers—then I went to the Gateway of India on the waterfront, and then the delicatessen. Soon I resorted to asking people about the punk, giving a description, then stood in alleys, and rode a taxi to the area of the American Express, even though it was late at night and almost everything in the city was closed. I looked for him late into the night, and ended up too tormented to sleep much.

Early Sunday morning, I went off hunting him until an hour before the train was to leave for Madras in late afternoon. Finally on the train, it began to dawn on me how extensively I had blown it. I felt a pained remorse. There were still many areas in me that needed a complete overhaul. I only hoped that god was not yet too remote to hear my plea. I knew that while I had been in the hotel garden, I had either gone insane or suffered some kind of anti-mystical state. My nerve endings had been unshucked and torn down to bare wires. Such was my condition only days before meeting Sai Baba. Now I no longer felt I had anything to lose by casting my fate to the wind.

The Bombay episode echoed on the periphery of my wind as I stood in the Ananthapur compound. I wondered how deeply Sai Baba would detect it, and my consequent despair. The door of his limousine closed behind him. When my mood suddenly repolarized by Baba's force, I felt the contradiction of emotions one feels when he comes head-on to a presence that is superhumanly great; on the one hand I felt insignificant. On the other hand I wondered what it was that might be important enough about me for a face to face meeting with 'a God Man.' If Baba could peer through people like so many tumblers of water, the thought entered my mind, then he was the litmus test as to their true worth, which made a direct confrontation with him something of a disillusioning gamble.

As devotees flowed in a circular pattern around Baba, I saw that I was not the only one who felt his dynamo effect. Undoubtedly Baba was the most magnetic human form I had ever seen. Unlike every other Indian holy man I had visited, Baba did not project a thanatopic serenity or an austere severity. Baba was incredibly youthful, fresh like a spring flower and with the vibrant energy of a queen bee.

Then I felt a second jolt as I saw Baba talking to an Indian near the car whose arms remained held up in a prayerful gesture. The Indian had made some kind of request which Baba had already known about, telling the devotee the problem before he could even get the words out, in a quick musical raspy voice. As the devotee's mouth dropped in awe, something else happened.

I had been studying Baba's physical structure, who, six inches shorter than the man he was standing with before, or for that matter any Indian there, resembled a dwarf-sized giant. His huge head of wiry black hair flowed above a neck so thick and muscular that it looked as though it was transplanted off of Bronco Nagurski of the Chicago Bears. Underneath this floating head was a diminutive well-muscled little body narrowing down to two tiny feet, cloaked from neck to foot in a brilliant red robe, which made Baba's head appear to hover over an eternally frozen fiery jet of red flame. Suddenly the flame flickered as Baba pulled his sleeve up. In an abracadabra motion of spinning his arm in circles with the open palm down, I did a double-take, noticing suddenly that the hand was no longer empty. My God, he had worked a miracle. From nowhere he had a hand full of grey powder that he was pouring into the devotee's hand, instructing him to eat it. While the shaking devotee jibbered a thank you, Baba spun around flashing me a large sparkling smile. Before I could even react, he was busy talking to another man, explaining the man's personal family problems before the devotee even had a chance to tell them to Baba.

There was an immediately obvious non-human quality about Baba, but I wasn't sure I could define it. All that I could conclude was that "non-human" suggested "super" rather than "sub"-humanness, and only a full master could transcend the human condition. As Baba proceeded from person to person, he seemed to act in absolute spontaneity, suggesting the busy impersonality of a bee vibrating pollen out of a flower. And this rebounding from person to person made me ponder a key idea of Vedanta—Baba's access to people's thoughts in spontaneous short order, could only be explained by the concept of 'thoughtless-all-knowing.' That only an enlightened person without the limiting ego could harbour the infinite impersonal mind of god, as the mystics explain it And this implied to me that Baba was like a walking doorway into the absolute, and when he talked or acted, it was merely the meeting point of the impersonal nature of godhead tuning down the comprehensible personal aspect of deity, not to be mistaken for just another guy.

Baba suddenly spun away from the people he was talking to, presumably a family with a common need, and came straight

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over to me, while I reminded myself not to blow it by losing my poise.

Baba's English was practically baby-talk, while his black eyes told an entirely different story, radiating vibrant awareness. He didn't seem to assess me, but already seemed to know me. "Hello, Rowdeeee," he chimed with taunting playfulness. Then looking concerned he asked, "what's wrong, some sickness in the stomach?" Then almost without thinking I patted my stomach, looked up from the ground and said "Yeah, Baba," more astonished at my informality than anything else, "a little stomach trouble." Which was true of course, since I had been having stomach trouble on and off since entering the country, switching from one brand of bacillary dysentery to another with probably some amoebas to boot.

Turning my head sideways a little, I looked down from his hand to his eyes several times and gestured with a look, "what's that stuff Baba, do you have any for me?" The answer was a quick audible "Oh Yes . . . called *Vibhuti*, divine ash." Again, Baba's hand began rotating in wide circles for at least the fourth time in five minutes. In an instant he had a handful of grey powder sitting in his hand, which he immediately poured into mine saying, "Eat, eat, it is good for the health."

Feeling almost like a different person than when I walked through the gate, I stood there licking off the palm of my hand as a slight tremor ran up and down my arm. Baba was still smiling as I cleaned the last traces of ash from my palm. Then as suddenly as he had come over to me, Baba left, quickly entering the house on the compound owned by the principal of the local engineering college. Meanwhile I stood there absolutely stupified, thinking to myself, "Now, no big thing mind you—just about half an ounce of stuff miraculously summoned into existence from the casual nexus by a single act of will. Just elaborate latice structures of crystallized carbon, whose sum total energy quotient would melt a subcontinent if unleashed properly." It was getting dark outside, and the few of us permitted in the compound were immediately invited inside the house for what they called a small *Bhajan*.

As I entered, there were about forty people seated along the living-room floor, men on one side, women on the other. The room was fragrant with incense and fresh flowers, and on all the walls hung assorted pictures of Hindu deities, and in key places, large mounted photographs of Sai Baba. Facing the audience in the front was a large flower-garlanded chair and footstool for Baba that was draped with a tiger's skin—a Hindu symbol of transcendency. And on the front row sat the *bhajan* leaders, and several men and women, who led in the singing and played a number of instruments including the tamourine, small brass clackers, and a floor organ called a *harmonium* constructed like an accordion.

Directed by the Indians, I sat right on the aisle near the wall, waiting like the others for Baba to emerge from his special quarters upstairs. Music lit the room about the time I heard Baba's raspy voice from behind the kitchen curtains, as the host and hostess skittered in and joined us. Baba sat down, keeping time with his hands, and the singing became louder as faces lit up all over the room.

Baba nodded his head from side to side with the music while tapping his foot on the stool. Then I noticed that he was rolling up beetle leaves and popping them into his mouth, which in a matter of moments, turned a bright cherry red, lips and all. And like a broken record, couldn't escape the semblance—god or no god—Sai Baba resembled a big happy pollywog. If he gave someone a special look one second, the next moment he would appear bored with the whole room. Repeatedly he looked at me as he swayed his head and chewed away, as if to say, away, "I know who you are."

Suddenly Baba was on his feet. As Baba sprang out of his chair, the Indians stood up and chanted a Sanskrit praise to Baba and then stood in silence. A few people came up to Baba, knelt down, and touched his feet.

The words of an aristocratic Indian girl I knew in Delhi rang in my ears, "You foreigners will accept anyone as a guru—people like Maharishi are export items as common as tea, but we Indians will have nothing to do with them. There is only one I have heard of who the Indians trust, he is Sai Baba—he doesn't go politicking like the others, they come to him, from all over India. His miracles have heen discussed by almost all my countrymen, and after fifteen or twenty years, they have been accepted without question. There have been far too many instances of his miraculous abilities for peoples to doubt any longer. People may doubt whether he is equal to Lord Krishna or Jesus as he claims, but they have ceased doubting his miracles."

I walked up to Baba, who immediately switched all his attention on me, and did what the Indians call *Pada Namaskar*. I kneeled down and touched my head to Baba's feet, and remained there as he patted my back saying, "very happy, very happy—*santoshanam*." With both hands he finally grabbed my shoulders and slowly raised me up, smiling affectionately. The host waved those of us up front to resume our places.

As Baba walked down the aisle by the still crowd of beseeching and prayerful devotees, he ignored everybody but me, after abstractly smiling at the entire group. He stopped right in front of me and whispered in his raspy voice, "tomorrow, sir, tomorrow." When Baba had left the room, almost half the room encircled me asking what he had told me. Sensing this was a supreme gift of confidence from Baba, I held my silence and left. As I passed the host on the verandah, he called me aside and said that Baba had told him to make sure to tell me that he wanted to have a private audience with me on the following day. Seeing my joy, the host remarked, "There are very few who Baba notices this readily. You have no idea how lucky you are."

I was driven back to Ananthapur that night by one of the wealthy local businessmen, owner of the largest automobile parts store, who had been a Baba devotee for twenty years. He told me what I was starving to hear, details about Baba, his childhood, his miracles, his behaviour patterns, his claims, and every bit of it was astounding. "You are indeed fortunate that *Bhagavan* has plans for you—just accept these things by faith. They are no mere coincidences, but the will of god."

As I entered the door amidst a whine of beggars on the porch, the owner pointed to a greasy section of the wall where there was a permanent menu painted. It was the only non-vegetarian menu in town, revealing another fact about south India, vegetarianism.

Soon a boy in rags plopped a small glass of water down, that he had been carrying with his thumb halfway down the center. The contents splashed across most of the slab. As he ran off to get a rag, I noticed that the glass was not transparent but rather translucent with what looked like a yellow glaze of coatings of accumulated grease. As usual in predicaments like this, I yelled for a Coke, which international standards should ensure against amoebic dysentery and jaundice. Sure enough, the kid came trotting back holding the bottle not in the middle but right on the mouth, and I swore that if I found his thumb jambed in the mouth, I'd break it on the table, using the bottle as a hammer. He was lucky, he had the good sense not to cork the bottle with his thumb.

Suddenly in mid-track I realized that I was already quickly falling from the grace that I had just received from Baba, and that India's squalor was like a raw nerve. The whole process of falling from grace—and I reduced it to a preposterous scenario; I could see it in my mind, front page of the "Rishikesh Enquirer," "Yogi Mau-Maus entire village with a stalagmite."

The article would read, "Mantra yogi claims, after meditating in a cave for fifty years and being on the verge of *Savikalpa samadhi,* that a mosquito stung him, and in his heightened awareness, it was like a railroad spike in the shoulder-blade. Rather than merge with the absolute, Yogi Tamas-Boscene-Ananda chose to have the keen edges of his consciousness infected by minor irritation. He fell in one second what it took fifty years of concentrated meditation to achieve. After chasing the mosquito around in the cave with a stalagmite—broken by superhuman strength—he reached the yogic depth of cosmic rage, entered the outside world, and within twenty minutes was in the shopping bazar of Rishikesh riding a Brahma bull, flailing the stalagmite, and chopping people down like bananas. Inevitably, the article would conclude, "Yogi Tamas-Boscene-Ananda will be reincarnated on the level of a termite."

By the end of a boiler-hot meal of mutton curry·and rice biryani, my mood had evened out as I stared up at a forty-watt bulb and recalled the high points of the day. It didn't even bother me that my stomach burned with a blend that was almost was routine for me now, chili peppers, masala, curry, Coca-Cola sugars, and carbonatad water. Nor did it bother me that night that there was a new spiritual presence in my room, softly whispering on the edges of my mind.

5

At six in the morning, not feeling exactly refreshed, I rolled out of bed to begin washing up. Before I could even finish my coffee and snack in the verandah, I could hear a cycle sputtering outside.

We buzzed off on a medium-sized Indian motorcycle shooting through crowds before I could even get a grip.

The strange barren Andhra Pradesh countryside was beginning to look almost beautiful in the yellow morning light. I noticed in the distance several conical mountains that jutted out from the flat ground in almost perfect symmetry. Anomalies of topography, they resembled immense termite mounds that instead of shaping along the contours of the ground, looked as though they had been plopped down as land grafts from some prehistoric volcano world. Already the sun was beginning to bake the air, even at six thirty in the morning, at a time of year when most countries were knee-deep in snow. And before too long it would be soaring up into the nineties.

We pulled into the driveway of the compound in an almost irreverent cloud of noise, between a long line of Indian devotees who instanly saluted us. I felt like a caricature of Arjuna on the horse, as I looked up at Baba's window. His silhouette was shaking a chiding finger in my direction. Then I heard Baba's low laugh addressing attendants in the room, from where I thought I heard, "riding on a motorcycle." After dismounting and waiting for a long time, I became anxious that perhaps Baba had reconsidered it and I didn't quite qualify. With the rest of the crowd, I stood quietly listening for the faintest stirrings in the house while eying the windows for movement, hearing nothing more than the occasional buzzings of Baba's voice.

By the end of over an hour, suddenly Baba emerged from the house. The crowd jumped to attention, making way for Baba as he headed towards a car. Near the rear, I had to stand on tiptoes. He briefly glanced in my direction but gave no acknowledgement.

Then I noticed people waving to get my attention. The merchant who had driven me home the night before ran over to me sputtering, "Baba says you are to come with him. I am to drive you." Baba had not misled me and a new hope appeared. Out of all the hundreds there, Baba had singled me out to come with him, even making sure to supply me with a car.

We made haste out of the driveway behind Baba's car, while the merchant informed me that Baba was inspecting the site of a new school to be built in his name. It would be the largest girl's college in the state and would have an allotment of as much as "forty lakhs of rupees" or several million dollars, which will get you a lot of labours, materials, and a whole lot of building in India. He told me that there were already ninety six schools of one sort or another named after Sai Baba, including the host's engineering college and the recent extension of the University of Bangalore at Baba's Whitefield Bangalore residence.

Once we were on the barren plain for forty minutes or so, the jaunt almost seemed irrelevant. Not much was accomplished apart from our wandering around a respectable distance behind Baba on a desolate tract of desert. At times, Baba would strike out in different directions, and a small party of architects and engineers would go running after him with palms constantly cemented together and blue prints rolled up under their arms. And every time one of them tried to unroll a blueprint to show Baba, it resembled an elaborate ritual of eating an ice cream cone without using any hands. Meanwhile Baba seemed to pose, wink at some people, smile at others, and essentially make light of the whole thing.

The upper echelon devotees continued to be as stiff as penguins, with morbid solemnness they walked about as though carrying the crown jewels. Motioning, waving, and trotting back and forth, they inscribed huge arcs along the ground with their feet to delineate vital parts of the future structure. I was sure that if Baba had proposed bulldozing one of the local volcano-mountains and paving a palacial driveway with hedges and date-palms straight up it at a seventy degree angle, they would not have flinched but would have dutifully called Bombay to get it underway, and ship up the machinery.

While the engineers and architects continued flapping and wailing over what appeared to be an empty ground, Baba suddenly headed over to his car, got in and was driven off. The show was over, as conversations soon lost their intensity.

When our car pulled into the compound, almost immediately the surging crowd was calling for me in a low voice. "Go, go. . . in the house. . . *bhagavan* has called you." The verandah and front room were packed with people of all ages. And I saw to my relief that I was not the only one summoned to see Baba as I followed several people single file up the stairs. Among them was a white man in his early thirties who looked like a cross between an old testament prophet and the perfect occidental mystic yogi, of such archetypal proportions that I wondered if he had been discovered by some exhaustive MGM screening survey.

Baba stood in the open doorway smiling as we walked in. The room was fairly large with a stage, and he motioned us to sit in the traditional Indian manner at the foot of the stage, on which he was to sit before us, perhaps elevated a foot or so above us. About eight of us gathered together including me, the mystic, one or two single men, and a small family from Pakistan. The fragrant room was so opulently decorated that it bordered on garishness, but then it was to be expected as a certain cultural variable. Our audience with Baba was given a feeling of exclusiveness from the rest of the world as the curtains were drawn.

Remaining in the room near the window were a handful of the engineers, architects, and I assumed financiers of the building site that we had just surveyed. I was bothered by their presence. Somehow their awkward insensitivity led me to suspect that they lacked the capacity to appreciate who Baba was, grunting and flustering over engineering symbols, stress points, relative strengths of materials, and what not. How could they be oblivious to what

I perceived as paramount issues of the Messianic calling and Baba's true significance? Yet they still bickered on, occasionally freezing like penguins when Baba moved, but apparently satisfied with a worm's-eye view. They naively wagged their tongues, idly discussing a little detail here and a little detail there, before one, who if he revealed even a facet of who he was, like opening the panel of an atomic pile near critical mass, would release a dazzling brilliance that would blind them and leave them quaking in terror. It was no obscured secret in India but a proverbial sing of divinity in Krishna's well-repeated declaration to Arjuna, "If you saw me as I truly Am, you would not live." Baba made the identical claim. He dismissed them in a note of chiding as they tiptoed out. With us, it would all be love and light, free from the humdrum meanderings of the world.

When the door closed, there was a brief silence. As though trying to catch an elusive plant filament in a stream, I realized that no matter how hard I tried, I could not keep in my mind who Baba was. There was a familiarity and yet an unfathomableness that would not mix. I felt similar to an amnesiac hearing the voice of his father and searching through the family photo album, constantly feeling a strong visceral tug, but never quite pulling the memory to the surface. And this was denuding.

With quick bristling movements, Baba's gown swept by me as he mounted the stage on tiny child-sized feet. He sat on the floor on the platform, supporting himself by an extended arm, with feet curled up beneath him. It called to mind the emperor in 'The King and I' whose head was always slightly above every other head in Siam.

Everybody was slightly nervous except the mystic who was beginning to resemble a lion, exuding a fiery boldness out of his eyes. And when I met his eyes, they didn't flicker, they just burned on like two steel beams as two of the most powerful eyes I had ever seen in my entire life. Perhaps he had gone through a thousand "dark nights of the soul," and knew something about the avatar-man that no one else did, and maybe he had gone through so much that he could take in a lot more than other people. I didn't know, but this is what he seemed to project with an unflappable self-confidence as he sat in a half-lotus with widening nostrils. My eyes would run into his huge lions's mane beard and flowing head of hair and I'd begin to think, "He's no hippy. That's the real McCoy that the sheep have been imitating for the last decade—solid as the wall of China, and he knows he knows."

I looked back at Baba on the platform. Unlike the lion who looked like he had fallen through the center of hell and come back heavier than mercury, Baba was an immortal flower. Stronger than anyone on the continent, he didn't need to come-on-strong, yet could probably melt the center of the moon with one single titanic thought.

Baba spoke, "God is Love. God is everywhere," cutting to the core of everything in utter simplicity.

"God is like the sun and man is like a flower. The sun shines on the flower and the flower grows up towards the sun, becoming beautiful and giving off sweet nectar. The nectar is *prema*—love—god's love ("lowve"). Love is one, love is god. To love is to know god." Baba nodded while his eyes affirmed beneath their sparkle, "I know of what I am speaking. I am not just spouting off silly words to titillate you."

With some sadness Baba went on, "But if the clouds of ignorance, ego [Yego], jealousy, and hate come in the way, then the light of the sun is on the flower. There is no *prema*, no nectar and the flower is wasted. The sunlight of god's love is always shining. It is only the clouds of man's thoughts that get in the way."

Baba's parables were almost like modern day billboard slogans. Maybe, I thought, the only thing that can cut though our twisted complexity so that we can be brought to the heart of the issue.

"Life—*sansara*—is like an ocean with big waves. To cross the ocean, use the lifeboat of god's name, always calling on it. Repeating the name is called *Namasmarana*, and is the lifeboat. At the end of life, you will reach the shore of eternal peace, *Prasanthi*. No more waves, no more sorrow and suffering, only bliss, *Ananda*."

Baba spread his hands, about to tell a great story. "God—*Paramatma*—is like a big ocean, all one. The soul—*jiva*—becoming moisture in the air, forms clouds. Now it is separate from the ocean. The clouds move in all directions over the land. The small rain drop is the *jiva*, the soul, separate from god. It falls on the mountain, becomes clouds again, and falls again over long period of time—many lifetimes. One day it enters a small stream, it slowly goes down the mountain and joins a river, medium-size river. After a long time, it joins larger like the Ganges and flows many hundreds of miles." Sighing with relief, "Finally, the river becomes very wide, very slow, flowing into the ocean again. Now there is no difference, water droplet is one with the ocean, the same everywhere—all god."

From Baba's viewpoint, enlightenment seemed almost pedestrian; so easy, so inevitable, that the idea of undergoing the required *tapas*—discipline—was almost superfluous.

Looking over the entire group, Baba waved his hands to ask, in a standard Indian gesture, "What do you want?" He looked at the Pakistani family and asked in a light chiding tone, "What is it, family arguments?" Then he shook his finger at each one of them playfully indicating he knew their deepest secrets and was by no means fooled by their best behaviour. He saw them when they were being nasty, but he was not fazed because Baba had the strength to cope with every single sordid secret on the earth, and could see down to the divinity behind the rotten little areas of human nature.

Baba diagnosed their problem, "Anger, ego, jealousy, hate, greed, desires. Too much desires and no understanding, just confusion." They bowed their heads in shame. Baba's tone became kind again, and they perked up instantly.

Baba looked at the father who was flushed with emotion and said, "Love is very important." But Baba's tone also said with a note of warning, "The discipline to love that you are afraid of is nothing compared to the impersonal and harsh justice that can befall a negligent man." As Baba became stern again, the father was brought practically to sobs, as the other members of his family began to gleam in triumph. The kids sat up, the mother looked proud, arching her back like a painting of Sita.

"Anger," Baba declared, "is weakness, big sign of weakness, not strength." The man's face puffed in shame to hide the source of his weakness, rage. "A strong man has self-control, gentleness, not rage." The wife and kids reflected the quiet satisfaction of those who have been suppressed now standing by as the bully, their suppressor gets cornered by someone who is ten times as big, becomes, like them, cowering and humiliated. And the rage in him knew that if it escaped, it would get utterly creamed. The Pakistani pleaded with Baba holding out his hands to indicate helplessness, and Baba soothed him like his mother and showed him a standard to follow, love.

And they huddled together, children's heads on their mother's noble and long-suffering lap, as they refused to accept the stench of their own sin, playing to the hilt, righteous victimization.

In their greatest moment of weakness, Baba forgave the entire family, endearing himself to them forever. With abundant kindness, he smiled at the kiddies, told the parents to cheer up, and said that he would soon see them privately to give them "special help."

As a ubiquitous force seemed to fill the air, Baba began rotating his open hand, palm down, clutching something. then opening the hand again. Baba revealed four metal plates with a photographic likeness of himself in colour on each one of them. The plates were at least three quarters the size of Baba's palm, maybe two inches and a half oval, a bit large for prestidigitation, even if one were wearing a London fog overcoat, which of course Baba wasn't. Baba's thin, silk, one-piece gown clung tightly to his body without a single opening other than the neck, the bottom, and Baba's sleeves, which, incidentally, had been rolled up beyond the elbow. Both Baba's hands were in crystal-clear visibility the whole time, one hanging limply by his side, the other way out in front of him, over us, and the stretched-out little arm had been bare from the elbow down. If this wasn't enough, right after Baba handed the four plates to the Pakistani family, he began rotating his hand again. The same shock wave undulated through the air, sending up and down the static acrylic fibers of my trouser legs, only this time Baba's palm was full of grey powder. *Vibhuti*, Baba cheerfully announced, "divine ash."

Baba turned to me then. "You have a nice place to stay in Ananthapur?"

"Sure, Baba," I replied with total abandon, hoping not to lapse into inchoherence. "Hotel on main road, best one in town, Baba. Good facilities—not important though, Baba, anywhere will do."

"Yes, I know Rowdie. What is the name of the hotel?"

"Oh, you know that, Baba, Vidya Bhavan, or something like that."

"I know, I know," Baba laughed, "Food is good?"

"Yeah, Baba, the food is OK, not bad at all."

"No Rowdie, the food is not good. Too hot, too dirty, too much spice, not pure food, not *satwic.*"

Baba gave me a look of mock chiding. "Driving on a motorcycle, very noisy, very rowdie." He motioned at the group, "I see him this morning, driving through the gate, sunglasses on, looking like a gangster." We all laughed.

Baba looked at him and nodded, to inform us who this creature was. "Mr. Freedom," Baba announced as I heard a low groan. "Freedom means *moksha,* no more birth, no more death, only union with god." Ahab rolled his eyes like a suffering lion, and groaned loudly. It was the deepest male voice I had ever heard in my life, and it resonated in base tones like the bellows of a huge organ in an old European cathedral, suggesting to me that there was a supernatural potency added to his natural voice.

Baba responded reasuringly, "Be patient, freedom coming, freedom coming." He looked at Baba with a gaze that didn't soften in the least—the two implacable eyes fixed on Baba and became the eyes of a samurai swordsman pinioned between a blazing forest on one side and an approaching armada on the other—never showing fear, but remaining aggressive, even in the face of certain annihilation Such was the difference in magnitude between him and Baba.But Baba seemed pleased with this sort of audacity and exclaimed under his breath, "What a man!" He smiled gently and let the suffering lion roar. Something I was sure was an out-of-bounds relationship with Baba for the Indian devotees. And I was sure that if any of the former penguins tried to pull it off, Baba would verbally slap them down, and they would decompose on the spot like gelatin aspic spooned out on some burning equatorial concrete.

Then Baba addressed the whole group to say that enlightenment is no easy matter or random gift that one happens to stumble upon. It is difficult. But without grace, Baba assured, it would be impossible to attain.

Baba arose from the platform and want over to the door, biding the Pakistani's to follow him into the room across the hall, at the top of the stairs.

After ten minutes, the door of the adjacent room opened and a troop of bleary-eyed, hyper-emotional Pakistani's filtered out in a haze of powder-filled air. Their foreheads were smeared with a bright red powder, known as *kum-kum,* that Baba had materialized for them. Someone ignorant, for a second, might have gathered that a grenade went off in the room. They carried a handkerchief loaded with *vibhuti* plus a large gleaming silver container. The child announced to the entire room that Baba had materialized the silver vessel for them as well as the sackful of *vibhuti*, staggering me with the fact that something weighing several pounds as big as a grapefruit cannot be palmed.

In the next breath I felt as though I was going to float away like a helium balloon as Baba's eyes and mine locked. "Cyam on, Rowdie." Legs wobbling slightly, I went through the door of the little side room as Baba's hand slapped me on the back.

My viscera seemed to know that the stakes were incredibly high, and it would take a while for my intellect to really catch up. Exactly how much free-will I had, I wasn't sure. Despite twenty centuries of arguments and deadlocks on free-will and determinism, I could not take freedom to *react* lightly. I was convinced that it was not all the sheer mechanics of genes and complex molecular reactions rebounding off an infinite set of environmental inputs.

As though hearing the voice of an archangel, the thought entered me as a siren from heaven; that by a single act of free-will, from some vast summit of choice, a man can either be glorified beyond measure or impaled for eternity. I should take heed.

The god-man, *Sathya* (truth) Baba, whose robe today was the colour of blood, closed the door behind me. I knew that even if there was a remote possibility that this Being was not who he said he was, the only way I could win in the end was, first of all, to be absolutely honest about myself. And nor could I get hung up over the fact that millions across India were teaming for even one word or a smile from this person which would be enough to send them back to their villages rich in blessings for the rest of their lives.

The room was small. It had a little window on the far end, a chair or two, a dresser, and a bunk bed. Baba stood in front of me, a full head and a half shorter, and spoke in the sympathetic tones of a pitying mother who is tending a son convalescing from a catastrophic accident, still wincing from the pain. This simple gentleness of Baba's disarmed me, soothed my fear of being vulnerable, and bathed the thousand seeming inner centuries of desolate cold.

Certainly the tenderest part of me I had fortressed like the Wall of China around the Temple of Solomon, and almost no one was allowed into the temple of my heart. My own emotional past had been a wasteland of the spirit where I was hardly able to love, simply content, aloof, and always ruggedly independent. Those times I had opened up to love with any intensity, I always burned out like a meteor over some Cinderella flower of a girl, knowing that it would never last forever; that something brutal and harsh in the world would stifle the love, like frost killing a honey suckle. Spiritual love I knew was the next step, but I hadn't found very much in that either.

Describing my runnings to and fro Baba said, "Confusion, much confusion. Not happy, not happy. Often travelling from America, Europe, India, Bombay, but only finding trouble. I know, sir, you are looking for the truth but finding only confusion, no peace." I nodded as though to a doctor cleaning out a wound with salve and dabbing other wounds," Yeah, that's where it hurts. That too."

"Not happy in America, too much materialism, and no love. Always looking for love, the pure love of god, but only finding a small sample."

"Yes Baba, just a sample."

Then came a dose of tonic. "Dedication to the truth, sir. Coming to India alone—very brave—taking many chances, bad food, pains, always alone, thieves . . . ." And Baba's eyes gleamed but I wasn't going to say anything about the Bombay rip-off yet.

"Yes, Rowdie, money stolen in big city, causing great spiritual fear and confusion." Baba was humming like a top.

"Yes Baba," I was breaking a little.

"I know your whole past. Very unhappy chilhood. Bad adjustment to the world. Hating school, not happy with family, looking for love, but never finding. Not satisfied with selfish love, looking for divine love." With a note of reassurance, "That is the way to God, never give up, search with a pure heart, and you will reach the goal in the end." Feeling awkward looking down at Baba, who stood about six inches away, I sat down on the edge of the bed and looked up.

"Some worldly desires, many impure thoughts." I agreed to that wondering what the spiritual X-ray would dig up next. "You must control the mind, the mind is like a drunken monkey. More desires, never ending from birth to birth can only be conquered by faith in god. Life for most men is only eating and sleeping, food coming in and going out like a tube."

"You still have some doubts, some questions?" Baba asked.

"Yes Baba, but they are difficult to translate simply, very complex metaphysics, Baba. Subtle things." And I wondered if I shouldn't scrap all that extra luggage and be like a child.

"Yes, I know, I am in your heart."

A *sloka* from the Bhagavad Gita suddenly pricked my mind. "The guru appears when the disciple is ready," Maybe my whole future weighed on my response to Baba right now.

"Baba, I want to be under your guidance, what do you want me to do." It was like letting steam out of a cooker.

Baba dazzled. "I want only love. That is my life, that is my mission, to love my devotees. Krishna once said to Arjuna, 'I am your servant, I am the servant of my devotees' love.' This is true."

Rubbing my belly, Baba suddenly noticed, "You are still having stomach trouble." The room filled with a crackling force. Baba stepped back, sleeve up and hand twirling with palm down. I warned myself to accept whatever it would be with the humble grace of an orphan—but I was still swept off my feet.

Baba's hand in a fraction of a second exploded from an outstretched empty palm to a massive half-open fist clutching an egg-sized object.

In one second of the world's history, I had stood silently witnessing the kind of Gargantuan miracle that would have caused pandemonium in the major scientific institutions of the western hemisphere. But none of these considerations mattered to Baba, who held the object like any other object. It was a large crystal structure of pure transparent white, which looked like quartz at first; but was in fact a large chunk of rock sugar. Trying to ward off the beginnings of a gem collector's greed, I wanted to study it forever and build a glass case around it as a monument of the miraculous.

But the incarnation of "Truth" would have no such thing. He motioned and I tilted back my head and opened my mouth like a baby robin as Baba jammed the entire thing in my mouth. Then Baba wrapped his arms around me and held me in a tight hug, as his hair bristled in my face. While returning the embrace, I didn't want to seem ungracious of this sacrifice of mind-blowing affection, so I tried to gather what wits I had left and use them to dispose of the miraculous chunk as unoffendingly as possible, muffling the slurs and crunching sounds. There was a brief moment of infant-on-the-bottle helplessness, as I stood there gagging and watery-eyed, but I was determined to get all the gravel of sugar crystals down my throat so that I could more heartfully return the embrace and really be the prodigal son returning to god.

After thirty more seconds of hugging I thought,". . . not a door left open to construe rejection after I leave here . . . and he takes this kind of risk to prove it. He's gotta know people pretty well, the wrong person might flip out. Lord, they all blubber when they are even near him. He just can't hug anybody who comes along, not with those millions out there." I felt I should weep, but I was just too stunned.

From my earliest days, hand to mouth affection invariably made me feel awkward, because I always insisted on holding my own. I noticed then that the thing about mother's boys that always turned my stomach was that they seemed to enjoy the degradation of being powdered, petted, and stuffed. And they'd sit fluffy-haired holding hands with some matron-like little Liberaces just digging the passive dependency while fifty feet away the other boys might be playing football, and they would still feel no shame. My reaction as a kid when some lady tried it was to push her off, give her a hard look, or leave as quickly as possible. I didn't mind it if a girlfriend wanted to hold my hand, but not any mother figures. And as odd as it might be, I was almost feeling this particular flavour of mother's love coming from Baba.

Then I brushed it all out of my mind. If I was putting pig slop on the holy grail, it was the poisonous suspicions of my own heritage that could misperceive divine affection and read "effeminacy" where there was total innocence if not something far nobler. I gave Baba one last squeeze remembering that the gender of his body was irrelevant to the deity that filled it. From my brief moment of doubt, I went from quick repentance to hope and joy. And was hungry to learn what great promises lay in store for me.

Baba forecast a glorious future. Consolingly, then Baba exuberantly said, "Do not worry. You will be very very happy. It is in my hands. Very lucky, very lucky."

But I wanted to hear more. No matter if I did win the Irish sweepstakes in today's spiritual achievement so far, what about the daily doubles?—Why not go for broke and find out about whether Nirvana, or *Moksha*, or whatever word for enlightenment you want to use, would be a part of the winnings. As I posed the question, I could just see every pre-planned model concerning my future for the next decade fragment and spin off in all directions. And I hesitated.

But I went for broke, and Baba responded with a smile that took up half his face, "Do not doubt, never doubt, sir. Time coming soon. No more fear. Very Verrrry happy, Bliss." That did it. Baba now moved back a pace or two, and I began to get the signal that my time had run out. But there had been something that I simply had to get out.

"One more thing, Baba," I exclaimed urgently.

"What is it, Rowdie, say it," Baba replied impatiently in the manner an uncle might tolerate a favourite nephew who wants to show him the same card trick for the fiftieth time.

"I had an experience, Baba, four years ago . . ."

"Go ahead," Baba encouraged with eyes widening in enthusiasm.

"I was alone on a mountain, and I took something like Soma. . . you know, in the Upanishads, Baba."

"Yes, yes."

"My nervous system re-structured, Baba, total jump in energy," I whispered loudly as the air shivered in and out of my lungs in a constant rapid tremor.

"Yes, I know," matter of factly.

But I had to verify the metaphysics just to make sure I hadn't been misreading all the signposts on the way. "Well, you know how light goes through a prism and breaks into many colours . . . well in reverse order the colours rejoin on the other side, and turn into white light again. Well, on the mountain, Baba, ego, cells, body structure, mind awareness like broken-down light, before the experience. After a while, I was taken back up through the prism . . . I went through a pin-point of light, Baba . . . very tiny, like atom . . . had to turn inside out." By now my eyes were beaming and I was gesturing wildly with my arms.

"Everything was consciousness . . . Chit . . . I . . . fields, trees, grass, pebbles, stars, all pure consciousness, Baba. Cleverly disguised by now everywhere."

Baba quietly nodded and numbled below his breath in another language while knitting his hand through the air in a peculiar way.

"Everything melted away, baba, and became god, pure light. I want to go back. This is what I have come for, Baba."

"Yes, I know Rowdie, I know this."

"Baba, did you cause that experience to happen?"

"Yes. That was your due. Reward from the past. Just a taste, you were given a taste until you were brought to me, but temporary experience not good enough. Complete *samadhi*, *Nirvikalpa samadhi*, never ends. It is forever bliss. That is the goal, sir."

With the "Tree Experience" verified, my faith that had been slowly eroding for the past few years, leaped out of the ground like a phoenix. And the dying battery of eastern metaphysics had suddenly been moved aside to reveal a giant electric power terminal that could do much more than make the previous flashlight bulb glow orange. It could drive elevators, a million machines, and illuminate ten thousand miles of tungsten in a metropolis of bulbs. Holy god, I thought, I have stumbled upon the avatar of the world.

Baba opened the door and ushered me out with his hand. And I floated down the stairs' sideways, waving goodbye, just marginally there, enough to know when to stop waving. Baba leaned on the bannister almost appearing surprised as he looked down. Just as I reached the final bend to disappear from view, Baba saw the last traces of my face eclipse at about the speed a good healthy tug-boat passes behind a pier to dock.

Without any plans from one minute to the next, I decided to sit it out for a while, as I headed towards the front gate across the now almost empty compound. I was still too rattled to do anything, so I just climbed up on the front wall and continued thinking.

If I got into the maze of pursuing the possibility of Baba's being a deception, then it might mean the strange limbo of never quite believing and never quite disbelieving, and it would become an eternal approach-avoidance stalemate.

Certainly if I lingered on in proximity to Baba, yet keeping my distance all the same, it would be absolute folly. Without the crucial faith to submit, I would show as much understanding as the fellow who takes his toothache to the best dentist in the world but never quite trusts him enough to open his mouth. Even if he spent every minute of the day in the waiting-room, it wouldn't improve his chances any more than spending the day at the films. Proximity to the dental chair would work no great magic.

It had become epigrammatic to me that the spiritual highways of the world were packed with people who never went beyond the waiting-room. They went on through life sacramentally sniffing the disinfectants and anaesthetics in the air, while assuming that the ills of their souls were being magically bleached away. But to make the commitment of mounting the chair, well that was simply too much to ask of them.

I resolved to stick it out with Baba, and climb the chair, if the operation turned out to be a painful high-level quackery, I might lose a few teeth, but if my heart was still earnestly looking for the truth, at least I would be released from that particular waiting-room, which might have been my doom either way.

I looked up from the wall and saw Ahab rapidly approaching. For the first time I saw him smiling. Still soft-spoken he said, "You know, the interview was not over when you left." Much of his hard veneer had gone, leaving a contented Rumplestiltskin.

"If I'd stayed, it would seem like I was asking for more, and he'd already given me too much." He laughed sympathetically. "How do you celebrate a day like this?" Ahab responded with a personable country bumpkin smile, almost out of character with his features but not quite.

His voice deeply resonated as he began speaking with slow, well-chosen words that took on the classic phrasings of a Lao Tze. Ahab's face changed back to an ancient solemnity.

"I seldom speak, and when I do, it is never for long. So hear me, brother. In a manner of speaking I have to come down from the mountain to talk, and I never like to, it is extremely painful to me and unbalances my whole *sadhana* (path to enlightenment), which is to slow down, sloooow doooownnnn."

He took a long breath, changing his word tempo almost to Zen Haiku. "All I can tell you brother, is what Baba had done for me, and his nature that I have experienced; his nature is to love. He manifests this patiently and unceasingly. He is not human, so do not mistake his outward form with who he is. He is god manifested in the highest sense and in the fullest embodiment. I have never seen one who gives so completely and continually as Baba gives. Yet his material gifts are only a shadow of the spiritual boons that he can give, when he so chooses. But you have to be ready to receive them, and he will test you to see if you are ready.

"He is very child-like when he gives love sometimes, but don't let that fool you, he is a perfect master. Sometimes his love can seem harsh to us. But he doesn't love your ego, he loves the real you. And do you know who that is, brother? That is god. That's who you are and who Baba is, and he can be spanking you with one hand and feeding you candy with the other, but it is for the sole purpose of waking you up. And that is that secret. That his greatest gift is love. It is freedom, freeeeedommmmmm, release from being born again and again in this ignorant life of the world. And liberation is the only gift he really likes to give, and the reason he came into the world to free souls and take them back into him.

"I cannot put Baba into a category for you, he is a mystery. I have seen many holy men, none are like Baba. When an avatar kills a man, as Rama once did, he is released. That is why I ask Baba for death, it is the most complete and immediate means to the void. He first wants you to become weary of this world, and know how it separates you from god. Then he may catch you one day, feeding your ego goodies and trinkets with its defenses down and giggling. That may be the time he takes the sword and kills you forever. What you do not know is that it may have taken him aeons of patience to set you up for that one perfect moment. Only a master can operate beyond time like this, so remember, do not limit his love to the tiny acts of this world that you have mistaken for love for so long."

I mentioned the "pin-point of light as the doorway into god," he registered it but did not show any emotional response. Not wanting to lose the thread, I wanted to find out more about him. "By the way, my name is Tal, who are you?"

"Just call me Gill, that is enough," he finally responded after I had gently prodded for his last name.

For a moment I watched him like a hawk, probing the black chasm beneath his irises and the range of characters in his features. Because there were less than a handful of people I had met who bewildered me this much, registering dead zero when you tried to read them. Most people were as plain as cornflakes, sitting happily in the middle of the bell-shaped curve. But when their eyes were the mine shafts of Ahab, now Gill, that was a totally different thing. Perhaps some consolation was that he appeared to have equal difficulty in assessing me.

The lion came up to the surface for just a second, perhaps weary of the confinement of having to relate, and maybe tired of being probed, but it disappeared soon enough. I wasn't sure whether it was going to depersonalize, and soar off like a rocket, or turn at me for the kill. Instead, Gill told his story in smatterings, hesitatingly, and at times almost grudingly, but nevertheless with considerable resolve.

"The time that this happened is not important, but for a two-week period while I was living in a coastal town in California, I experienced without interruption, the state of *samadhi*, suddenly and by no visible cause, including drugs. I had knowledge, and there was no limit to what I knew. When I saw people passing along the streets, I knew them better than old friends. I knew everything there was to know about them. And complete strangers would stop in their tracks, look into my eyes, and in reverence and trembling ask me questions about the meaning of existence, and about who they were. I would begin teaching. On street-corners, by the market, wherever I would be. And by the end of a week, crowds followed me around, many earnestly beseeching that I be their teacher.

"I prophesied, and all that I prophesied came true. Many returned to me, offering to lay their possessions at my feet, but I refused. That was not what I wanted. I loved so much, that it was not possible to love any more, yet many also hated me. I don't know, some of it I can still remember . . . . But the freedom, my god, the bliss." Gill for a time looked away almost dejectedly, with his lion's head of hair, large broad face and abundant beard standing out against the sandy white of Andhra Pradesh.

"When I would will it, there were miracles, but it was neither my habit nor my interest. They simply occurred spontaneously in my presence."

Longingly he explained, being in the absolute center of the flow, the Tao, "Every act was as effortless as moving a hand through the air, as the world tended to my movements and needs, instantly without friction. It I felt hunger, someone would appear with abundant fruits and melons, if I needed clothing, it was there."

A look of torment appeared on Gill's face. "I did not think it was possible to come back from that perfected state. But at the end of two weeks, after knowing god, after being one with the light and without ego, I plunged. I fell into the outer darkness, and all the loneliness and despair of the world weighed on me like an anchor. "I was back in the world again, and had my ego and desires, and fears, and it took everything I had for me not to kill myself." He stopped to take a long breath, half closing his eyes and muttering, "Freeeeedoommmmm," and it sounded like "Aaaauuuummmm."

"How did it happen?" I asked consolingly, well aware that this was mine-field.

"I thought that I could go to bed with my wife and remain untouched. I didn't need it, nor did I want it, it was more of a test than anything else to make sure that I was free from attachments forever."

"After that I went into the deepest depression of my life, deeper than I thought possible, trying to find some way to regain my former state. It was then, two years ago, that I knew that I would keep looking until I found it or died. I left my wife, my kids, house and friends, went off alone to live on a beach, and I meditated, and meditated. I talked to no one, vowing silence. I wore only what I was given, and slept on the ground when I did sleep. But most of the nights I spent meditating."

"What kind?"

"The void. But to do that, brother, you've got to slow down. Sllllooowww Dooowwwnnn, the mind and everything about it that is not who you really are, and every lie that this illusion is capable of. And includes people and that includes nature. Those are two enemies that are going to trap you till you cry to be released. You've got to be out front all the way, and you've got it alone, on the line, with nobody to hold your hand. Unless he happens to be god." This wasn't yogic play nursery with macrobiotic picnics and co-educational Friday night *hatha* yoga class with all the groovies; this was spiritual mountain-climbing on the level of the *upanishads*, and separated the trendies from the men. Whether or not Gill had known it, he was following an ancient path taught in the *Vedas* five thousand years ago. It was *sanyasa*, the fourth stage of life, and all true brahmins in later life followed it, leaving the world to go into the forest to meditate and live off of roots until death or liberation caught up with them. But detachment or *vairagya* was essential.

There was only one note in the ensuing conversation which repeatedly struck a bad chord with me, and that was Gill's sole interest in reaching cosmic consciousness and promptly leaving the scene, leaving his fellow men to flounder in the maze, in the same misery he had departed with the help of the guru. The humanitarian in me was outraged at what appeared to be callous indifference.

But Gill had transcended it all, weary of guru-games and spiritual Boy Scouts, wanting nothing but the void. He deliberately spelled it out, "My sole aim is to enter the state of *Nirvikalpa samadhi*, in which if you remain for three days uninterruptedly, you proceed into *Turya* samadhi. The body lives for twenty-one days, all normal functions cease, and then it expires. During this time, the *atma* will have reached the full identity with the absolute, never to return to ego-consciousness again." I decided not to attack Gill with the question of whether his entire ambition was not due to some deep-seated gnarling of his personality, that may be the very thing that Baba might be trying to work out of him with all Baba's tender love.

"About three and a half months ago, I was in the desert of Tecate, California, meditating at about three in the morning. I had taken mescalin, a practice I had not done once during my *sadhana* . . . I was desperate I guess. All of a sudden, the entire trip, and it was a rough one, ended and everything became still and clear again. I saw Baba in my mind, standing before me and smiling. The next thing was that he was right in front of me. He reached over, touched me in the center of the forehead, the *ajna chakra* and then his face grew bigger, and bigger, and bigger, and started spinning round and round . . . and I got higher and higher, and higher, and literally soared to the same place I had been when I had been in *samadhi*, I was free. Just when it got unbearably blissful, and I thought I would be going home forever, Baba pulled me right out of it, disappeared and left me sitting alone on the desert, stone-sober and back to normal. Well, the next day I saw a movie about him at the Baba ashram near-by, and learned I could actually get to him physically, and learned that he was really there. From then on, things fell together perfectly, visa, passport, plane ticket, and I was out of the country within a week and sitting right in front of him."

Gill chukled, "Ya know my whole mind was prepared for it to all happen the minute I met Baba. He would just reach over, touch me like he had done in the vision, and that would be it. It would be all over and I would be free as a bird. I never dreamed I would have to go through what I'm going through now."

While he described the initial misunderstandings, favours, and tests from Baba, every story in the ancient books portrayed the path to enlightenment as a titanic cliffhanger. whether it was *Bodhidharma* sitting at the Wall of China for ninety year, or some ancient Tibetan rites of initiation, where the adept at the final stages has to turn into a dragon to lie at the bottom of a freezing murky mountain lake in the black depths for ten thousand years.

"You mentioned 'going through things'. You seem a lot lighter than during the interview. Has Baba taken you through something or am I misperceiving?"

"No, brother, you see right," Gill responded ponderously. "Now and then when I am meditating, I still leave my body for no apparent reason. This started some years ago in California when I would be lying beside my wife one minute, and floating around the ceiling looking down at my body and my wife's the next. Last night this happened again while I was meditating under Baba's window. My body became numb as I found myself starting head-on to a very frightening man-sized creature, which was as real as you standing there. Maybe the moonlight helped me see it, I don't really know . . . but its skin had the smooth-scaled oiliness of a snake. Its head was humanoid but flattened out, like a man with a nylon stocking pulled over his head, it had even a long flap of skin coming out of the top of its head, like a stocking. The word for it, I believe is "familiar," you may have heard about them in Chinese lore. They are a class of demonic spirit beings. Well it scared the hell out of me." Gill exhaled in repugnance, slightly trembling.

"Before I knew it, I was out of my body and wrestling this thing all over the ground. I don't know how long we fought, but it seemed like an hour and it took everything I had. Finally I pinned it against the ground. But when I saw its face close in the moonlight, I knew I couldn't handle much more. I called on Baba and it vanished into thin air. However I have been shaken ever since."

Gill laughed ironically, "Baba had mentioned to me three times that day that I would see a vision. But I wasn't prepared for that and, consequently, did not remember what Baba had told me until the incident was over. Yes, I am relieved. When I saw Baba just now, he explained the meaning of what happened, but I cannot discuss that."

Brightening, Gill said, "By the way brother, you look a little lighter yourself. Did Baba give you anything?. . . you don't have to say." He was a merry Rumplestilskin again.

"Yeah he did," I sighed looking up at the house across the compound. "I never expected it, but he probably gave me what I really wanted. He hugged me like a long lost son." Gill's face became solemn, almost ashen, as he said, "That is a considerable gift. Baba, to my knowledge, almost never does that, especially during a first meeting." For a second, the child in this deep mystic who resembled a Bible prophet, looked dejected, almost sulky, then he shrugged and we walked out of the gate.

When we started discussing Baba's central ashram, a hundred odd miles away, an Indian devotee drove up and eagerly invited us to ride into town. As we got in we heard, "As Baba wills, I am only his servant." I smiled and Gill went back into his vow of silence, choosing not to respond, his face taking on the stony solemnity of Mount Rushmore.

6

At about four a.m., early in the first week of February, our bus, an old dilapidated Indian monstrosity, pulled up to the side entrance of *Prasanthi Nilayam*, Sai Baba's spiritual community. It had been three weeks since I first met Baba in Ananthapur, and since then I had decided to clear my head out for the long haul by taking a vacation away from India, with its never-ending noise, squalor, and filth: to Ceylon-green, underpopulated, and clean, its shores leapt with tropical growth against a bright cerulean firmament.

But by the end of ten days, after aqualunging, eating chunks of pineapple on the beaches of Monte Carlo-type hotels, restauranteering, and driving all over the luscious island with newly befriended foreigners, I had been sated, and was eager for round two of India's ascetic wildernesses and clamouring cities, or wherever Sai Baba might be.

The bus trip to Baba's ashram had taken over ten hours to go hundred miles, not including a four-hour layover in Penokunka—thirty miles away from Puttaparthi. Each ten miles farther into Andhra Pradesh, which convinced me that things could not possibly get any more primitive. But they did, dramatically so within thirty miles of Puttaparthi. The landscape went from desolate to more desolate, knotting and twisting in the moon and starlight into all sorts of weird shapes like giant cryptic writing, which seemed to suggest a supernatural numina within the terrain itself. By this point the road was more of a giant water-buffalo path, crossing rock-beds and streams, dropping sharply and climbing at hideous angles. More reminiscent of the bygone eras of the *Ramayana* than the twentieth century, the final hub of our journey abolished the last traces of civilization—except for our bus—as we entered the incredible silence of the night air, and the absolute piercing brilliance of stars above us. Not so much, as a cloud or a haze could be seen in the arid sky to obscure as much as a photon of starlight, lifting us at times, so that we seemed to be veritably perched on the shores of space.

In the dim street-light, fifty of us unloaded in front of a row of crude little padlocked wooden stalls, presumably the local stores. As I carried my bags through the large gate, I expected to see a private house of Georgian-Nepalese construction, where I might tiptoe up and unroll my stuff some whereon the living-room floor or the porch, and then go to sleep. But I got my first jolt, the sheer size of the ashram. An Indian girl on the trip came up motioning me to follow her. I gathered from talking to her during the layover that she had worshipped Baba from the time that she was a little girl, and had been here many times.

She quickly led me across a large compound that was squared off on three sides by long rows of interconnected suites. Almost directly across from the gate, we mounted a steep driveway which ran up a hill overlooking the entire ashram. As we approached the verandah of a fair-sized modern building she whispered to me, "If you care to steep, you are welcome to use this verandah of the hospital. Otherwise you can stay up, and wash soon, because the residents generally get up before four thirty to begin *bhajans, sankirtan,* and meditation," I chose to sleep, and she left quietly to visit an aunt who lived on the ashram.

From the hospital verandah, where I unrolled my sleeping mat, I could see, several hundred feet away, a large building that rose in height at least equal to where I stood. It was not only the ashram worship and meditation-hall, it was also the private residence of Sathya Sai Baba. Lit up by the ashram street-lighting, its upper stories and roof resembled the upper decks of a battleship or an aircraft carrier with different lookouts, ladders, and walkways. Far from being the usual dwelling of an austere holy man, which is rarely more than a cubicle with a thatched roof, this rock bastion on the desert housing a demigod, strongly reminded me of something out of Thebes or Karnak with maybe the ground dimensions of the temple of Jerusalem, roughly ninety feet by thirty feet.

I tried to shut two eyelids that were as dry as sand-paper. Just then I felt an iron wall holding me from sinking any deeper into sleep. A ringing harmonic filled the air, and I wasn't sure whether it was an ethereal freight-train coming through the mountain or a sauces descending down upon us. In fact the sound was coming from the large prayer-hall, and as I listened more intently, it turned out to be a good thousand male and female voices chanting Om, "AAAAUUUUMMMM", twenty-one times, each time drawing out to fifteen seconds with a long breath in between. After a silent pause, the faint wisps of a woman's voice floated out above the yearnings of a sitar, beseeching the night air like a minstrel from fifteenth century Verona. Full of pathos, the voice adored Baba, as Sanskrit phrases floated up into Baba's suite.

Almost completely lulled to sleep again, something far louder started up like a midnight lawn-mower. I sat up again, It was a human *choo-choo* train flowing under one ashram street-light after another. Hundreds moved in a long trail singing one song after another, circling in a caterpillar formation around the entire ashram. Then suddenly from my wing of the ashram, on the other side of the hospital, below the hill, shrill sing-song voices of children filled the air. I discovered later that at that hour, the kids in Baba's school are required to chant so many *slokas* from one of the *Vedas*. Some inherent fascination in the Vedic chants made me tune everything else out, as couplet after couptet rhymed ending in "num."

The words cascaded down to the familiar nursery song tune of "Daddie's gonna buy you a diamond ring." Only this time it was an ode to the overmind of the universe, as each ward resembled some element or compound on a vast cosmic Periodic Table. And in no time instead of Sanskrit, I was hearing, "Gall-ium
Dyspro-sium. . . German-ium, Euro-pium:
Lanthan-um, Magnes-iem. . . Lithium, Molybden-um;
Nio-bium, Pallad-ium. . . Osm-ium, Plut-onium,
Polon-ium, Postass-ium. . . Prometh-ium, Rhen-ium;

Scand-ium, Rubid-ium. . . Stront-ium, Selen-ium, Tantal-um, Vanad-ium. . . Thor-ium, Zircon-ium." Somewhere in all this, I managed to doze off.

By ten in the morning, near the canteen, I ran into the caretaker of the whole ashram, a six foot three Indian in his seventies named Suraiya. He ambled over to me and said, "Oh yes, we have been expecting you. You are the one Baba calls Rowdie is it? Follow me."

As we headed back across the ashram to the large compound of suites on the other side of Baba's prayer-hall, I learned a few things from Suraiya. He had been a "Baba" devotee in his youth, during the lifetime of Baba's previous appearance as an avatar, when he was allegedly incarnated as the Moslem-Hindu saint, Shirdi Sai Baba, in the state of Maharashtra. When the former Baba "departed" from the previous body in 1918, he told Suraiya that he would serve him again one day.

At the foot of the hill that the hospital was on, there was a long line of suites, usually six rooms in a row with a common verandah, intermittently separated by little gardens in between. There were three of these complexes, and since they were the most sophisticated by local standards, I named them "the luxury suites," somewhat tongue in cheek, because even so, anywhere outside India they would have been a travesty.

Suraiya pushed open the door of the end room along the first complex, and then ambled off distractedly. The first room was newly whitewashed, and was stone-bare except for a musquito net which opened up like an army tent in the center of the room, with a small straw-mat underneath it. On the front and side walls were several bare windows. I threw open the door leading into the next room and found a man with e cherry-red face doing a yogic posture sometimes called "the spider." He grunted and spewed, composed himself, and said, "Hi," forcing an effort to be friendly as he extended a hand while uprighting himself.

After a brief hello I approached the next set of doors fully expecting someone on a bed of spikes or buried up to his head in concrete. It turned out to be the bathroom. A large terracotta urn held the water-supply for bathing and flushing the little cement hole in the floor, an Arabic toilet. The room was dark, damp, and smelly, its walls covered with mosquitos, and in various rivulets of water running along the floor. I could see mosquito larvae. Trying not to lose my appetite, I unpacked in the first room, then headed back towards the canteen, agreeing to talk to my room-mate later.

The main hall of the canteen was a large shed with a flagstone floor and a corrugated aluminium roof. The people ate on the floor, sitting on long-woven carpets of jute and eating off banana leaves or leaves woven together to form a mat. As I saw them playing with the food with their bare hands, rolling the rice up into little balls, I began to lose my appetite again. I was immediately guided to an adjacent room with stone tables for foreigners and privileged Indian devotees. My worst visions, at the American Embassy snack bar, of what lay ahead, rarely fell lower than this. I just hoped that the food was up to World War II concentration camp standards.

For a while I had to hold the walls like a blind man, the room so darkly contrasted to the dazzling brilliance of the Andhra noonday sun. I noticed stone benches jutting out from the walls, front and back, so I slid over to sit at the table next to the door. When I finally adjusted to the twenty-watt bulb, I noticed that the entire lower half of the room, which was not a smeared whitewash, was the raw granite grey of cut stone, making the place resemble a prehistoric 'Fred Flintston' snack-bar. Smiling down from over the door into the kitchen was a photo portrait of Sai Baba, When I asked for the menu, the "waiter" gave me one of the most stupefied expressions I had ever seen, and pointed outside the rusty oildrum full of water where I was supposed to wash my hands with a tin can.

When I came back, the Indian, in his early twenties, leaned in from the kitchen with a puerile smile and asked, "Meals, *saab*?" I resisted becoming the "great white *saab*" and nodded my head like one of the troops. Still grinning, he mopped the table with a greasy rag, plopped down a woven leaf, sprinkled water on it, and I grabbed his arm to make sure that he didn't mop the leaf off with the rag. He left smiling again, while I seriously wondered if this was a tactic to rot out the mind of the great white *saab*.

He returned with a stainless steel bucket of hot steaming rice that had come out of a huge iron cauldron on the kitchen floor, and landed a mound of it on the plate. Next he brought in two buckets of *sambar*, and *dal*, then *bhajee* and *vegetales* after that. The *sambar* I had to rename pepper water because that was literally what it was, boiled pepper powder and whole peppers with a trace of salt and a few spices. The *dal* was simply boiled lentils mixed into a soup. And the *vegetales* were vegetables boiled to the 'nth degree, and mostly chunks of turnip, roodabagah, carrot, and black pods, resembling scorpion tails. I greedily spooned a huge mound of the mixture in my mouth.

The hottest pepper in the world, so I have been told, is something called the "New Orleans Blue," and is a bluish mutant species growing in the marshlands. Next in line is a black little pod in south India that resembles a scorpion tail—that might well be because the inhabitants are idiotic enough to actually use scorpion tails. At any rate, those who have ever seen a Chinese air-raid drill, will have some idea of how I looked in the aisle after placing the empty spoon back on the leaf, arms ellipsing in a pattern between rotary blades and dragonfly wings, and feet jumping up and down. My next mouthful came twenty minutes later after I returned from a short walk. Only this time, I spooned out all the scorpion tails. Now I could safely eat the food without having to walk around between bites. Indeed, all my bodily movement could be done in the stall itself, as I rocked back and forth between bites, occasionally shutting my eyes.

Leaving the canteen, I mused over the fact that not only was one's intake of this type of food limited, but what he did eat had almost no food value. Ninety percent of it was boiled rice-starch and the other assorted over-boiled vegetables added up to negligible amounts of protein, minerals, and vitamins. More amazing was that the people out here were on the brink of starvation anyway, and still they polished the rice till it was snow-white, removing the proteinous and vitamin rich pod. "It's hard enough to live off of brown rice, but white, not a chance," I reflected bitterly.

By four in the afternoon, after a siesta, the raging heat had quelled sufficiently for my room-mate and me to go down to the dried up river-bed half a mile from the ashram. He would stop by a tea-stall out on the road, rub himself down with coconut oil, remove his shirt, tie a handkerchief over his head, then buy a lime drink costing a penny or so initially, but probably more later, considering hospitalization. Of course, this would be a crowd-drawer, but he had that angle worked out too by sign language with the stall-owner, who had local methods of shooing the onlookers away.

The path to the river-bed was a water-buffalo trail that felt like burning embers whenever a rock went into my shoe. The sand on it was so fine that it was almost liquid, rich in dried animal excrement. As this was really my first chance to observe the local surroundings, I took note of how pebble-strewn and rocky the rising slopes were on one side of the path. Eventually, near the entrance to the river-bed, the slope became a mountainous ridge. On the other side of the path was a barrier of underbrush, trees, and thorns, closing off one of the local well-irrigated paddies, a lush-green little area compared to the starkness of everything else.

The white sand of the river-bed itself was blinding, as it stretched an eighth of a mile across and as far as the eye could see lengthwise. The remnants of the river trickled by, six feet wide and a few feet deep, and far from clear, starting and ending out of banks of sand only a few hundred yards away.

Herman, my room-mate, told me that the river was the bathing ghat for the entire area. He wrinkled his nose disgustedly and said with an accent hard to place, sounding like a cross between Detroit and the Bronx, "Dey come here by da hundreds, bathin in it, washjin in it, brushjin du teeth in it, pisszin in it, garglin in it, washjun da clothes in it. It's unbaleevable why they all don' die tomorrow. I can'd understan." We leapt over the river and headed for the center of the cauldron, as I tried not to touch any moist sand for fear of hook-worm or trichinosis crawling under my skin.

"If it's this hot in February, Herman, what's it like in July?"

"Unbaleevable! You notice thu animuls can hardly walk as it is. Ya aughta see em in the summa, they stagger like they was drunk."

The accent, it turned out, was neither from the Bronx nor Detroit, it was Russian. Herman disclosed his story in snatches. He had been an Olympic swimmer in the late 1930's, and soon skipped the country to go to America. I pictured him in some sub-zero Siberian night crawling under a locomotive, clenching on the bottom with hands and teeth, and hanging on several days as ice welded him to the brakeage system. After that he might have rolled out half-frozen in some ditch, only to run on as a fugitive from the secret police.

Herman and I turned around after walking almost a mile down the center of the river-bed. I felt much weaker. For good reason, it was hotter than the Syrian desert in mid-summer. I questioned Herman about the handkerchief on his head, and he replied, "Sunstroke. You get that and it'll put ya in a coma, and that can kill. Godda be careful in this sun, no kiddin. If ya feel nauseous, stay outa the sun for a few days." My mouth was parched. I kept my eye on the ridge over the bullock path entering the river-bed, and was reminded of "God's Anvil," in "Lawrence of Arabia,"

While we were walking along, I noticed that Herman had worked out a rather odd ritual. He collected hundreds of dried-out little shells of river snails, bleached bone-white by the sun. He explained that they helped him figure things out. I kept probing. Still tough as nails, short, bald, and stocky, his anger transformed him into a Bruegel medieval peasant.

Trying to overlook his mile-high defense screens I continued, "Lots of things can unlease knowledge about god or death. Is it about that?"

"It's suddle, suddle stuff. I have problems getting to it. Baba teaches me through these things. It has to do with time, it has to do with who ya are, and where you are goin." Defensive about looking crazy, he sighed off, "I cand really talk about it tho. You'll learn, you'll learn. Godda way to go though." He looked slightly contemptuous.

Angry but not wanting to over-react, I said, "Listen brother, I know a few things myself. Don't get the idea that because I'm asking questions, I don't know anything. I mean I came to India alone without anybody giving me any road maps."

Suddenly there was a loud trumpeting screech from behind us. Looking back, I spotted a tiny man riding an elephant along the side of the river-bed, where the river would soon begin out of a mound of sand. It screeched and blasted several more times, waving its trunk in the air. This was the finishing touch to put us into storyland. "OK, what's that?" I asked.

"That's *Gita.* That means the song of god. Thads whad Baba names it. Somebody gave it to Baba, so he keeps the thing. It lives in a shed, right next to Baba. It even knows how ta worship Baba. I tell you one thing, it knows a lot, id ain'd no dummy. Baba tellz me in id's former incarnation, *Gita* was his pet dog.

But it wanted to be with him so bad, he brought it back higher up on the scale."

As I eyed the "song of god," flapping and honking up and down the river-bed, I was well aware that this kind of talk in the wrong company, say at the Royal Conference of British Empiricises, would result in one's being institutionalized.

"When I come to Baba a couple a' years back, he tellz me it's no accident. He bringz me. He treats us real special; me, Cowans, Charles Pean, Indra Devi, Murphets, just a handful of older Americans. Then there wasn't so many big crowds. Baba, he talkin to us individually each day alone. Sometimes he come to my room several times a day. But you don' find him doin that now. One day he tell me I was a yogi in former life, that's how come I go to India."

"He tellz me all the answers are inside, I juz gotta get cut my former knowledge. I ask him why I am born in Russia, go through hell all the time. He tell me I almost reach enlightenment in last life as Indian yogi, but at the last moment I blow it. I gotta realize it's all his grace. He's stronger than we can ever think."

Herman eyed the ground, walking very carefully, and conscious of every movement. His face knotted in determination, as he whispered grimly, "I tell you somethin so you don' make same dumb mistake. Don' blow it like I did. I got big temper. Sometime blow my stack and don' care 'bout nothin. Baba give me a test in doz days when I had it so easy. I begin to doubt him. Don' ever doubt Baba. I start to think I know better than Baba. I get angry at him. Finally one day he correct me in front of people, I blow my top, pack my bags, and stomp off the ashram. Baba still love me though. He tells me before I go that one day I come back, head bowed low. I be sorry for what I did. But it be a little harder next time Baba predicts. I not be so close. I have big regrets for blowing it first time. He teaches patience the hard way. After leaving, I go to America, cool off, go to old way of life, and get miserable. Life goes downhill and I get mad at everything. Work hard in the photo business, make good money, but still not happy. When I recently come back to Baba after a couple a' years, he tellz me, 'So you've decided to come back. I am waiting for you.' Then he tells me first lesson is to think before speakin, that way no trouble. Now I keep my big mouth closed, and Baba don' talk with me so much, but maybe he's closer in other ways.

"I tell you, he's got power unbaleevable. He knows every word we're saying right now, just like he knows everything. He's a great mystery that nobody can understan. He once tell me, 'If the whole world spent ten thousand years trying to figure out all that I am, they would not even scratch the surface with all their intelligence and all their learning.' I tell you a little secret, he's God, don' never doubt that."

My curiosity was unquenchable now that we were on the subject of Baba. I had followed Herman's whole dialogue with "yeah, yeah," trying to keep the pump going. When we jumped back over the rivulet to the bullock path, Herman pointed up to a huge boulder at that top of the stony ridge above. Its total height may have been as high as a fifteen-story building, and growing out of it, conspicuously, was a medium-sized tree. "That's called the 'wish fulfilling tree.' Ya know why? When Baba was a boy, he'd go up there and pick people any kinda fruit they asked for—in season, outa season, tropical, cold weather, you name it, he picked it. One time, i'd be a pineapple, then a mango, apple, banana, orange, grape, pomegranate, whater-melon. He even picked cherries that they only find in the Kashmir Himalayas, thousands of miles away, and even if they had cars around here then, they'd get cooked after fifteen-day ride. Hundreds of Indians around here swear to this. You even find it written up in some of the old Andhra newspapers.

"That's not all that happened on this hill. For instance, it takes us ten minutes to climb it, and in this heat, we pant like a dog on top. Well, one day there's whole crowd at the bottom here. And Baba tells them he's gonna go up in the time it takes them to blink. Sure enough, one second he's down here, next second he's way up there on top waving down at them. Everybody falls down on their knees. They know, at that age, he can't be just an ordinary yogi and have that sorta power. Well, he yells down to them that he's gonna give 'em special grace. They wait for something to happen. It does! The center of Baba's head opens up, and light brighter than the sun comes out and blinds them for half a day after. He tells them that that's his real form, pure light. His whole head is a ball of light. Well, they fall down again and start worshipping him like god. And that's why he came here instead of the States." By six, I was ready to do some more exploring. This time my sights were on the hill springing up in the rear corner of the whole rectangular township-ashram, where the luxury suites sat at its base, and then the hospital on a plateau above them. Typical of all the local hills and mountains, it was stark, pebbly, and boulder-strewn. It jutted out from the ashram, forming long ridges growing in different directions and connecting with other hills. Two-thirds the way up, where much of the ashram below came into view, including the roof of Baba's residence-prayer hall, I met a tall elegant blonde in her early twenties, standing amidst a small grove of trees encircling the famous Tree of Wisdom. Her name was Victoria, she was English, and had the sort of angel food-cake prettiness that reminded me of an overgrown Alice in Wonderland. Her speech added the finishing touches to the portrait, as her words flowed in immaculate patrician English. For a moment I felt a romantic twinge for her, but subdued it with the trident of Vedantic philosophy.

She and a travelling companion, Anthony, had come to India on an overland bus tour, presumably because the trendy life of Britain's hip culture was becoming "a bit much," leaving an existential hole. After shuttling about the main youth-infested hip circuits of India, looking for a non-definable high after pot was only bringing them down more, they ran into one of India's minor gurus who was staying near one of the beaches of Kerala. Swami Chinmayananda would expound vedanta with the authority of a highly educated Brahmin intellectual, and they would sit stunned at this new way of looking at the universe. Almost immediately, they visited a local Baba temple in the house of a devotee, whose zeal and accounts were unending. When they saw some of the miracles taking place about the house, they were on their way, reaching the ashram about the time I met Baba in Ananthapur. Still they had only had glimpses of Baba so far.

Our talk ended, and she floated down the hill with a farewell wave, blue sari blowing in the breeze. I heard the loud *Om* of the "phantom ghost train" issuing from Baba's prayer-hall below. It was the evening *bhajan*.

During the next day, my explorations continued, as I toured the ashram post office, printing press with three small press, bank by the side gate, vedic school, and the hospital on the hill with its two wards, surgical unit, public clinic and X-ray unit. After lunch I went to the book store and bought every available book either by or about Baba in English, seven or eight books in all, and started reading them.

After tea, on my way back to the room, I passed the main front compound with all the sheds housing various pilgrims. Then the inner compound, right in front of Baba's prayer-hall, demarcated by rows of plants and a tall open gateway standing at the main avenue that ran from the inner compound, through the ashram.

The thick stone bastion prayer-hall isolated Baba from the depleting elements, much the same way Regents Park Botanical Gardens shielded its flora from the harsh sleet of a London winter night. And with its chlorophyl greens and whitewashed whites, Baba's hall incessantly reminded me of a green-house for an avatar.

The building ran at least ninety feet along the front, and thirty-five feet along the side. Two stories high, it rose over thirty-five feet with its high fifteen foot ceilings. The inside central prayer-hall was the hollowed out main portion of the building, running perhaps sixty feet long from rear curtains to the front stage, its ceiling rising up to twenty-five feet in height. It stretched the width of the entire building inside, thus limiting Baba's private quarters to two stories along the side ends of the building which interconnected the outside upstairs balcony, where Baba would walk back and forth from his bedroom to his dining-room, in clear view of everybody all over the main compound of the ashram.

Welded to the railings of the massive extended front porch were two silver-painted iron sculptures of Siva and Vishnu. Running along the ceiling of the entire upper balcony were rows of neon lights, and little Christmas tree-lights were woven along the rest of the railing of the upstairs balcony. Over the roof of the extended balcony were the highest ornaments of the whole building; the *Prasanthi Nilayam* flagpole, and an elaborately decorated pagoda next to it about eight feet tall, inside which sat a huge carved Shaivite fertility symbol known as the *Siva Lingam.*

Below the flag and pagoda jutted a carved marble bust of Sai Baba with a perennial wreath of flowers around its neck. It was one of the first things that always caught my attention, each time I glanced at the building, sitting out like a masthead. It looked out skyward with a sunny cherubic smile, with Baba's usual head of hair, only slightly parted this time, as he wore it in his early years. It reminded me of something decapitated from a mausoleum at the famous Genoa cemetery, where marble sculptures decorate the tombs nearly to gaudy wedding-cake patterns back to Michelangelo. With its Reno Nevada undertones, this made me wonder whether the ornamentation represented a level of high aesthetics I was unable to appreciate due to "cultural bias," or whether, as my gut sense felt, it was just plain gaudy

At about six in the late afternoon, people shuffled past me, spreading the word that Baba would be back that night. He had been gone three weeks. A car parked in front of the ashram police station, and several wealthy Indians got out, then I saw Gill, looking slightly disgruntled, crwal out of the rear seat.

"It's great to see you brother, how ya doin?" I asked extending my hand. No answer. Gill looked past me, and headed for the trunk to get his bags. I took them as a friendly gesture.

Continuing to ignore me, he grunted something and led the way, heading straight for the steps of the luxury suites. I could feel my heart drop, after just having reassured myself that on such a large ashram I could avoid close contact, if Gill became a pain. Now I could sense a difficult first test, if things got really nasty with a guy who might not want to give way.

Preparing for a long-term stand-off I followed Gill down the porch, passing evey door except the one at the end where Herman and I stayed. He entered what had apparently been his room all along, dropping a handbag at the base of the mosquito net in the front room, where I had been staying. Without saying a word, I begen to collect my belongings as Herman leaned in the doorway from the adjacent smaller room saying, "pssst., you oughta move in ta here." I thought to myself, "This guy's been allowed to get away with murder. What Gill needs is a mind to ripping all out super-aggressive confrontation. But I'm going to sit silent until there's no further back I can concede, then explode in his face. And if he wants to play psychic stand off games, I'll play until he won't be able to meditate for a minute a day."

I said to Herman, "Why hasn't Baba straightened this dude out, he's acting like a spoiled child? Somebody ought to tell him that he's a million miles from either compassion or enlightenment, and he's gonna stay stuck until he swallows his presumptuous self- importance. "herman just nodded.

The last thing I moved was my mat. By which time Gill finally spoke, giving ultimatums in the form of diciplinary rules. In turn I showed a part of me he had never seen before as I gave him a cinder-block stare. Gill shut up, exhaled angrily, and crawled under the mosquito net to meditate. While in the back of my mind, the lingering voice in the stare quietly said to Gill, "Sometime in the future when you like a steam cooker about to explode, you'll realize with some remorse that it would have been far easier if you'd done as I had done, and come on like an eager innocent child. But you wanted to be a hard ass, and that means that somewhere along the line you are headed for an ego death, and you're ultimately gonna have to swallow your pride. And that's gonna hurt, cowboy."

Within ten minutes, Herman and I were out of the room, and waiting on the road for Baba's arrival. In the long crowded line, I met Vickie's companion, Anthony, whom I immediately liked. Tall, serene, and gentle, I realized that here was the sort of person that Gill needed to take lessons from. And whom we needed to take Gill's place. Herman could be "heavy" enough by himself, but with me and then Gill piled on top of that, the suite was a potential land-mine. It needed a neutralizer, not a catalyst on the order of Gill.

Muffled shouts down the road brought pandemonium to the crowd. We moved, from where the stalls were down the road away from the ashram to where both sides had sufficiently thinned out.

Then my mind returned to the excitement in the diminishing evening twilight, as a phantasmal trail of dust arose from the road in the distance. I suddenly felt a particular brand of energy that I had experienced only one time before, in Ananthapur. I had not been in Ceylon, nor had it been present ot the ashram during Baba's absence. But I could feel it now, a vast sweeping hurricane of spirit flooding across the land where Baba went. Picturing the swirling silvery mass of an autumn storm on the Atlantic I thought to myself, "Forty miles in front of him, forty miles in back of him, forty miles to the right of him, and forty miles to the left of him, the spirit moves like a free floating magnetic pole."

A wave of dust sped at us in a widening parachute as its nose cone, a little cream-coloured Fiat, gleamed in the forefront. A hundred feet away I could see, sitting in the back seat, a red black figure searching out of the windows. Moments later, as the car was face to face with Baba, he smiled and waved, gleaming radiantly, then sped on.

In a haze of excitement, I kept apace with Herman and

Anthony into the ashram to cut the car off before it reached the inner compound through the front entrance. We bolted through the side gate, around the back of the prayer-hall to the men's front side—women stood on the opposite front end. People already lined the entire entrance. Within only seconds, Baba's car sped down the center avenue as shouts of "Om jai Sai Ram" filled the air. It raced around the fenced-in cement lotus, and pulled into the flagstone driveway beneath the extended balcony. Several ashram policemen held the crowd back, while specially appointed devotees motioned the crowd to calm down and remain still; Baba sprang out of the car athletically, and headed to the center of the inner compound near the lotus, amidst the crowd's gasps. Baba smiled, made enigmatic hand gestures, blessed the crowd, then turned to walk back to the prayer-hall singling me out on the way with a smile, calling "Rowdie." I waved back numbly as I felt the crowd's attention turn to me.

When Baba had gone into his private quarters, I assumed that was it for the night. It wasn't. Bhajans were now beginning, and word was out for everybody to go inside the hall. Those who couldn't fit could remain outside and sing, while sitting on the ground. Already near the men's entrance, which was on the front of the building, I leapt inside and sped down the center aisle to a row up front. The crowd funnelled in behind me. A brahmin priest patrolled the aisle motioning the thousand or so people to quickly sit down and shut up, making a hissing sound to quieten them. The women's entrance was across from the men's, entering via the rear side of the hall, which was exclusively for the women. The center aisle was the dividing line between the sexes.

Three loud "Oms" rung in the air. Then a male bhajan leader opened the service with a hymn of praise to Ganesha, the elephant god and overcomer of obstacles. Bhajans then alternated between the men and women bhajan leaders, with the crowd always echoing each refrain. Most of the bhajans were either in Telugu, the language of Andhra Pradesh, or Sanskrit the ancient Aryan tongue of the Vedas. And the songs themselves were usually written by Baba. By tradition, a whole bhajan would be repeated three times, doubling in tempo each time through, until by the end, the whole crowd would go like a locomotive at that critical threshold where a slight increase would render the lyrics a slurred word salad. The pulsating melodies, fired up by a harmonium and little brass cymbals, rolled on hypnotically, but it was no good my trying to mouth the words, they were just to alien for me.

Instead I tried to take in all that was going on. Baba's chair sat in the front mightily, elevating above us on a platform, like an Arthurian throne from the court of the Knight's Templar. A teak and silver affair, its only clue with the east was the huge "Om" embossed at the top in Sanskrit. On its armrests were laid a fresh white handkerchief and flowers, and stretching over it was a huge Bengal tiger skin whose roaring head, glass eyes and all, extended out to Baba's footstool. The throne was placed directly in front of the men's section, adjacent to the front side entrance which opened out next to Baba's private residence. Only Baba used this front entrance.

The stage directly at the front was quite an eye-catcher. The central points of focus, like two swirling hypnotic wheels, were two giant oil paintings of Baba. Lit from beneath, they were windows into another world. The left picture I entitled "the Old Man." A wizened mystic staring out into the audience through melancholy eyes, the old Sai Baba of Shirdi, Sai Baba's former incarnation who died in 1918, stood in some twilight-lit alabaster room donned in an ochre robe and characteristically knotted head scarf. The Baba on the right was the present Sai Baba as a young man—handsome, compelling, vital, and innocent—it was an Indian mythical hero smiling out at the women's half in triumphant detachment, like an unreachable god. Baba's virtuous face as a youth reminded me of the young Vivekananda, a disciple of Ramakrishna who became one of the nation's greatest modern heroes.

A life-sized statue stood between the two paintings. Adorned in silk and jweliery, and shaped and painted in incredible detail, it was Krishna playing the flute. The blue-black god was frozen in perpetual mirthful dance, enacting its legendary skill of captivating the hearts of devotees. The face with almond-shaped eyes and a coy narcissistically beautiful sidelong glauce, held a reed between the lips in the manner of "Giridhara Gopala," the cowherd avatar, more remniscent of the Greek god Pan than ever. The rest of the stage seemed strewn with items, including a large coiled silver serpent with the Shirdi Sai Baba sitting on it.

Suddenly a surge went through the crowds, inside and outside. Sai Baba had just emerged from his room, and was now outside walking amongst the people. The singing became louder and more frantic as people shifted around trying to get a view of Baba through one of the doors or windows. And whenever a bright patch of red shone through the bars, it was like a pulse of electricity.

Without forewarning, Baba appeared in the hall, walking in quick athletic steps, he mounted the wooden platform and took the chair. His brilliant smile soon faded into routine coolness as though he had never been away. The more heated the feasting devotees became the more indifferent Baba appeared, abstractly toying with flower petals and looking off into the distance. The women, all eyes on Baba, wheezed and puffed as they clapped their hands and rocked back and forth, transforming into a giant organ bellows trying to fire up the dying glow of an indifferent ember. But it was no good. They just couldn't tuck Baba away safely in a box, igniting him as a portable magi when they wanted. Baba would remain the formless fire, dancing with them for a while, but only for a brief season, reappearing in a hundred thousand other places as a flare here and a glow there. Such was the way, they had learned, of the formless Absolute in its ultimate almost brutal impersonality.

On the final note of a bhajan, Baba kicked his stool to the side, and sprung to his feet. Instantly one of the Vedic school boys in the back vigorously clanged the bell. The crowd jumped to its feet, lumping towards the front, while singing the closing ceremonial chant. Baba eyed the audience for a moment, while mysteriously weaving his fingers through the air, turned and left into the doors of his residence. On the final phrase of, "Narayana . . . Narayana. Om Sathya Narayana," the priest brought out a burning camphor censor, while the audience fanned the light towards their faces in a traditional gesture. There was a final exchange of shouts between the priest and the crowd, and then everybody crowded out of the hall as quickly as possible to get a final view of Baba as he appeared on the upstairs balcony.

Baba smiled down, then looked out towards the darkened lands of Andhra Pradesh and up to the black night sky. Then backed into the portal of his room, like a retreating mechanical figure in a cuckoo-clock. The crowd dispersed as the air hummed with night-time activity. Some went off to meditate, others to eat, others to talk. And the rest stretched their blankets on the sands of the ashram to sleep under a clear starry sky.

7

A quiet sizzling antagonism soon pervaded the luxury suite. Kindling this were such continual night-time harassments as a heavy stifling air that made breathing a physical effort, while the body was under the constant assault of mosquitos that swarmed out of the bathroom in nocturnal droves. To combat them required a sticky greenish paste that had its own setbacks. Raising the value of sleep even more was the spartan fact that we were without beds. Lying on straw mats with a cotton spread or two, our ribs and bones were at constant odds with the flagstone floor, giving us a distinctly bruised feeling when we arose from "sleep." However the greatest obstacle of all, the hour of reveille, was usually the time I would finally drop off—four-thirty in the morning.

The air of brotherly co-operation between Gill, Herman and myself was about as spiritual as three Oregon panhandlers who have all hit upon a gold vein in a river-bed, eyeing each other to make sure no one sneaks out in the night to pan for extra gold; and as everybody seems to be sleeping nice and neighborly, there's a creak from the bathroom door, and three shot-guns go off from different corners of the flophouse.

Gill, when he wore his farmer-brown levi overalls with suspenders and all, became "Shotgun Mountain Bill." Herman reminded me more of "Sammy the Butcher" from Chicago, especially in a self-styled Indian outfit that looked as though its origin had been more from the Cosa Nostra than anything else. And though the girls much later named me "Marshal Mat Dillon," I felt more like "Johnny Flash the Killer from Dodge City."

As silence became the golden rule of the place, it was evident to me that the particular brand of yoga my room-mates followed was a high-octane mixture of mortification of the flesh, ego negation, and yogic hard-ass-ness, while "love" in any form I knew of seemed to fall away from the picture entirely. Night after night, I could hear Gill's little alarm clock go off at two-thirty or three as he would sit up under the mosquito net to do *pranayam*—power breathing—for the next two or three hours, and not sleep again till nine the following evening. Consequently a considerable self-conscious anger, and finally rebellion, hit me each time I was forced to stagger off the mat at four-thirty, knowing that Gill in some meditative hyper-sensitivity could feel every crude movement. The more quietly I tried to slosh water on my head to wake up—so I at least would not fall over in the prayer-hall—the more I resented Gill's inhibiting presence. I felt his whole approach was wrong, but I knew I couldn't prove it.

Tired of the "heaviness" of the suite, Herman and I moved our mats outside to the little garden patch between our row of suites and the next. The three of us drifted further apart; Gill forever morose and self-absorbed, Herman more and more silent, and distrusting.

At the crowded darshans, as Baba walked amongst us outside the prayer-hall, not only would he return my smiles but he showered me with attention. In the meantime he would bypass stone-faced Gill, as he repeatedly singled me out to chat, joke, or slap me on the back. If I was on the top step looking out, Baba might sneak up behind me along a crowded aisle of Indians, then stand directly behind me with his legs and robe pressed against my back, pretending it was just an accident as he scanned the mass of devotees outside. He might remain thirty seconds, giving me a little nudge before moving on. Without a doubt, this constant seeking out of Baba's greatly fuelled my sense of purpose. Herman never got it, Gill seldom got it, and Anthony—good-natured, well-mannered, and deserving Anthony—nevet got it, resembling a Victorian guard as he respectfully stood in the shadows. What quickly evolved from all this was my transformation into being the king's squire, as Baba conditioned me to informality in relating to him as my rightful domain. Before long I became the message-carrier and relay station between Baba and the other foreigners.

Herman meanwhile was feeling the brunt of it all, as he reflected this by his increasing ritualization at *darshan*. The lines of his face solidifying into the German river troll, he would begin the manoeuvres of an SS guard. If he wasn't sitting on some strategic step that highlighted him, clenched jaw muscles and all, he would circumvent the threat of being ignored by the very official. With a penguin walk, Herman marched around Baba with a clumsy Rolliflex, awkwardly focusing and peering down the view screen. If he looked up for a feed-back, Baba's eyes would pass over him as if he was as real or significant as a lichen or an iron-post. Perhaps to validate himself, Herman would next begin elaborate technical maneouvres with the preposterous device. Baba would grimace; those quick enough to perceive, giggled. Phase two of the clowning would continue as Baba paced his movements exactingly enough to elude Herman's lens by a few degrees. Herman never quite tripped over, but he came close to it a few times. Even off-stage the Tom and Jerry stigma pursued Herman, mostly because of his apparel, a mutation of the Indian kurta shirt, with cut-off sleeves. The Cosa Nostra look. As a result, wherever he went, he constantly had his growing paranoia fed by Indians who stared and giggled at him incessantly. Perhaps Herman saw all this as signs of his "heightening awareness." Nevertheless, soon enough we were no longer on speaking terms.

The final cut came the day Herman handed me the keys for our new room. He included ultimatums and entrance stipulations, making the aside that the best thing for me to do was to "stay shutten up." He got a cinder-block stare, as I pondered the idea of making him a cartoon character in my mind from then on. I pointed out on the recent strangeness in his behaviour and increasing hung-upness. "You oughta see yourself in the mirror, pal. I'd begin to worry if I were you. The same thing's going to happen again that happened the last time."

His eyes burning, Herman resembled a brain-damaged panda, "Um gonna say thiz one time and afta that itz finish. I no talk to you, you no talkin to me. Thatz best policy. Now I'm givin you the keys to the new room Baba told us to move to. But you can only stay there if you shutten up."

Heating up fast I replied, "Hey Buddy, you don't sound very co-operative to me. Now I just told you that if you come on like that, you're gonna get burned. I've got a question for you. Is that your room to give away or is it Baba's? And if it belongs to Baba, who the hell are you to give ultimatums? You're playing with dynamite, friend. Now I'm afraid that I'm going to have to go to Mr Kasturi and find out if Baba really relayed all that stuff to you, qualifications about my shutting up and all. And if he didn't, here's my advice. You'd better make peace with yourself and God fast, because you're going to blow it."

Red as a pimento, Herman dropped the keys into my hand and stomped off, jibbering at the injustice of even having to relate to me. What he needed was a young green-eared yes-man who would follow the orthodox yogic school of a Herman. "Zey would valk alonk and agree, 'Dat's what um sayin . . . ya just gotta keep shutin up da mouth and keep de earz outa other people's affairs. And be real careful. Dat's de way to spirtchul enlightenings." And the American archetype would respond, "Sure, Jackson with the cosmic love of Mao Tse Tung."

The reason Baba was moving us out of the luxury suite was that it was nearing one of the three biggest festivals of the year, Maha Sivaratri, when over 50,000 pilgrims would soon swarm the ashram converting it to a human termite-mound. Naturally this included those who had financed and built their own rooms, including the luxury suites. The luxury suite owners were the super-rich, Bombay shipping magnates, governors of State, surgeon generals, etc.

Our new cubicle was along a row of thirty rooms that faced the luxury suites across the compound. Herman inspected it, sniffed it, and when I walked in, took his bags and moved into a guest lodge outside the ashram. I could see the omens lining up for him. Gill meanwhile had drifted a thousand light years more from either one of us. He moved into Indra Devi's blue Colorado caravan tent, and pitched it in the garden patch between our former suite room and the next row of rooms.

The difference between the new room and the suite was that it was quarter the size, had a tenth the light with its twenty-watt bulb. And as well as swarms of mosquitos, it also had swarms of cockroaches, some as big as mice. It also smelled. Since all these rooms lacked bathroom facilities, many residents used the path at the back as a lavatory. That was when they were too lazy to do what everybody else living on the ashram had to do, and use the neighbouring hills for defecation, be they old men, women or children, no matter what time of day or night, cobras or no cobras. My greatest fear was having diarrhoea, and having to run up a hill twenty times a night, treading on a scorpion on the way. Still contentment had to be my byword; introspective paroxysms or not to reach it, I had to "transcend the shacklings of the world."

Two new Americans had just arrived from New York city. And, according to Mr Kasturi, were to become my room-mates whom I would partially oversee until they adjusted.

One was a fairly attractive Jewish girl named Michelle, who seemed self-sacrificing and agreeable . . . and well-built, with whom I envisioned night-time devotionals. (Yet I knew that to allow the demon of lust to know me off path would be a really puny way to go). With lust settled, I knew I was safe with Michelle. With her companion, Jai, I could see that I would have other problems.

When I saw Jai at Darshan, it was hard to believe that he existed out of the comic strips. I began to suspect that Baba dragged him across half the world just to blow my mind. He was a Brooklyn Klutz; obnoxious, wore glasses like coke bottles that expanded his eyeballs in the concentric circles of an onion. And he was interpersonally oblivious to the point of being a social moron. When he talked, he screamed . . . "like he was yellin' at sum schmuck across Grand Central station." After two minutes of seeing him make Cherokee Indian "how" signs to Baba, I wanted to take him behind the ashram and quiet him down with a tire iron.

When he greeted Herman, it was my first true glimpse of homicide in Herman's eyes. With Gill, it was even worse. Gill took him to some inward plane of non-being and unmade him.

But Jai persisted. In baggy, wrinkled pants resembling diapers, and a bright Miami flamengo shirt, he puttered about blipping non-sequitors to strangers. After several days, I noticed 'that he neither washed nor shaved. He didn't trust the water-supply. He claimed at one point, in the monotonic intonations of Robbie the Robot, that he would probably have ninety-three days of physical existence left before he expired. After sampling the food, he decided that his intake would be close to nill. He smiled as though we had reached a new level of rapport when I told him he was an idiot.

After seeing him grimace and agonize one morning, I also realized that he had problems regarding the bathroom situation, severe problems. He stated that he was a "being" who was "totally modest," and therefore could not use anything during the day but an American toilet, and the only way he would use the great outdoors was in total darkness. I could tell Michelle had "had it up to here." So Jai, with the "forebearance of a true yogi," would have to grip his bowels like the doors of the Kremlin till nightfall. It was a close contest. By late afternoon, he was crawling about the porch as though he were going through labour, undulating his head.

To the dismay of many, Baba was perfectly friendly with Jai, though he passed Michell for several *darshans,* as she sat neat as pin, freshly washed, and sitting like a bunny rabbit in a new Indian silk sari. It hurt but she tried to hide it. But a new fire leapt into the eyes of Herman, Michelle, and maybe, even Gill when Baba came up to Jai and asked, "Hello Sir, are you happy?" And Jai, wearing something like a Polish bowling "T-shirt, smiled as though he had just won the double-bubble chewing-gum contest, held up his hand as Chief Grey Cloud, responding with a loud "How," and then dropped his arm limply, swaying back and forth like a baby hippopotamus. Baba gave him a parting smile, then headed towards me. "Tell other foreigners, there will be an interview coming very soon." Everyone cheered and danced afterwards, except Herman and Gill who kept their cool.

Back at the room, Jai and Michelle told me how they had met, through a mutual friend, Lila, and consequently through their New York guru, Hilda Charlton, under whose guidance they had grown as brother and sister disciples. Not that it was easy. Their natural animosity for one another was explained by Hilda, who stated that it was a carry over from past lives together where there still remained a residual "*karmic* debt." But she encouraged them all the same. After all, they were exceedingly high souls, differing only in their individual approaches to God.

Michelle's story was not atypical; communication barriers with her family, rebellion, irreconcilable differences with the norms of society, jobs, college, etc., and finally the arduous pilgrimage through counter-culture, hippiedom, multitudes of LSD trips, on the road. And the limbo got increasingly worse, her state of depression shooting down the graph until, when she was "just ripe," Michelle met Hilda Charlton, the only woman she was ever able to really love and respect, and who gave her a sense of self-respect, and most of all, who seemed to love her abundantly. Confusion left, spiritual purpose was added to her life, as Michelle had clear goals ahead under Hilda's constant guidance.

Hilda took her in like an orphan, trained Michelle in different techniques of yoga, and finally gave her the authority to lead numerous sessions of Hilda's growing following of eager aspirants, maybe fifty kids in all. They sang together, meditated, did *pranayama*, concentrated on the inner light, got words of wisdom from the ascended "masters" such as "Master Hillarion and Master Kutchumi," and received visions of Sai Baba in India. And often Hilda would sit with them at her feet like a big spiritual nursery school teacher, and tell the eager kids about her own sojourns throughout the eastern world, for years where she had travelled as an entertainer. As a virtuous single woman looking for the truth and spiritual love, she sought her perfect master. It had been an arduous chain of testings from one guru to another—until Hilda met Nityananda an "avadhut." Finally she met Sai Baba, and knew that he was "Lord Krishna come again." Now Baba had given Michelle a vision to come to him in India. But now that she was here, it was already less glorious in some ways than what she had planned, as Baba received her somewhat coolly.

Jai, speaking with as much feeling as if he were reciting strings of binary digits, went on to share what sounded like a well-planned tape-recorded autobiography. He had obviously shared his amazing story with quite a number of people.

Jai reminded me of "Yogi Schwartz" in Rishikesh as he spoke in Brooklynese. "I was nevah a hippy, nevah a dope fiend, I was totally straight. I lived a completely Koshah life that made my motha very proud from the time I was a liddle baby. I nevah had an impure thought, I remained chaste throughout my adolescence, always working hard.

"But yogic experiences, that's something I can tell you about. Those I had from early childhood onward." Jai was Alan Sherman as "My Son the Yogi" and "Camp Granada" turned out to be *Prasanthi Nilayam.*

As Jai unwound, Michelle straightened up the room in a rigid, quiet, self-enforced tolerance. She must have known the facts by heart. She lit a candle in the wall box, then some incense, and finally set up an altar comprised of items out of her suitcase, pictures of gurus, gods, goddesses, Hilda, plus tokens of various types.

Jai's first contact with the higher forces occurred when he was seven. "Night afta night, I had the same dream. I would be sitting cross-legged on a large river—it turned out to be the Ganges—whose banks were near a city, which I also found out was Benares. At any rate, as I recited the name of my chosen diety, doing a special type of breathing, something happened that frightened the heck out of me. A tiger approached from behind out of the forest, jumped and mauled me, finally killing me. I'd actually die in the dream. There's no death worse, believe me. As a kid, I'd just sit up in bed sweating with the lights turned on. Later on, when I was older, I learned the dream was a leak through former life, when I was a yogi.

"In high school, another thing happened. I was in the row back of my history class. Suddenly as the teacher was talkin,' he changed right in front of me. His head got huge and grey, his eyes separated, his ears hung down, and he grew a trunk. It was an elephant head on a man's body. He talked like that for ten minutes, and I was the only one who saw it. Not only that, but I heard things that the class didn't. He told me to read the *Puranas.* I did, and soon found out that he is a god, one of my own personal deities. He is the son of Siva and Uma. His name is Ganesha, the god of overcoming obstacles. In fact that's how I got A's in high school, through him. He told me to work super hard. But when I was in trouble, he'd come to my aid if I invoked his name. During one examination he told me the answers to each question. I got an A on it, of course. But one night he appeared in my room and told me that he wasn't my highest personal deity and not to worry, since at the time I'd find out, and know her immediately since she was a goddess I had been worshipping for hundreds of lifetimes."

"It finally happened when I was a student at New York University, had involved in research at one of the India exhibits on tour at the museum. I walked into the special exhibit of ancient Hindu gods, and before I knew it, I was in a corner facing this two feet bronze statue of the most beautiful woman I'd ever seen. I fell at her feet and cried. Suddenly . . . Blam. . . from outa' the center of her forehead came a blue ray of light into my face. I saw lights and stars, and ended up dancing around in the room for may be twenty minutes. Then the statue started speaking. I can't reveal all she said, but she instructed me in practically all the yoga I know now, telling me her name was Lolita Devi. From then on, any time I closed my eyes, I could see her. And any time a major thing came up, I always asked her advice."

Lolita Devi guided Jai into a doctoral history programme at Columbia University, until he was later told to drop out. By then he met Hilda Charlton, who was to be his guru and earthly embodiment of the "Divine Mother."

Suddenly Jai and Michelle chimed in together singing a song composed by Hilda called "Divine Mother." When that ended, it was a one man show again as Jai rattled off song after song he had composed about Lolita Devi· One sounded like a Rhumba with strings of complex Sanskrit words, a yard long following each refrain which he spit out like a computer. He kept timing with the standard baby hippopotamus gestures and idiotic grins. Finally Jai and Michelle withdrew into the silence of their afternoon meditation, sitting stiff-backed against the wall in either the full lotus or semi-lotus positions.

At nine the following morning, on that one day I had really overslept, I was caught red-handed by Suraiya who stood in the door and said, "Baba has sent me to wake you up. He knows you are oversleeping. Come on, he is waiting for you. He will not start the interview until you are there."

I dashed across the ashram, through that crowd right up to Baba's door, feeling combination of embarrassment, guilt, and exuberance. Baba flung the door open, while the crowd held up its hands in prayer, and chided me with a shaking finger and a smile. This was my second interview since Baba had arrived. The first was a weak back when Baba ignored Herman and Gill, and invited me, Anthony, Victoria, and a number of Indians.

The group sitting on the floor looked up nervously, while Baba still shook his finger at me and announced "oversleeping, oversleeping." I carefully eyed Herman and Gill for signs of condemnation. Herman looked grim, Gill disgusted. And I thought, "OK fellas, he's gonna catch you with your psychic pants down too, so don't gloat." With those two there, it was a real damper on me. I liked to relate playfully with Baba, as a child, and with their constant heaviness, it was a lot harder, as the temptation to become self-conscious grew.

Baba directed me to sit beside his chair, to his left. Then he explained that this would be the last interview for a while until the *Mahasivaratri* festival a few days away, ended. Already fifteen to twenty thousand pilgrims were swarming the ashram, camped either around the grounds or under one of the huge sheds. Baba predicted that there would be over forty to fifty thousand coming, all told; from Ceylon, Bombay, Calcutta, Delhi, Madras—companies and organizations, officials, ministers of state, and cabinet members. So far, several hundred buses were already chartered from Bangalore, bringing pilgrims from distant provinces all over the land who had been travelling every imaginable means.

Baba gave the confiding laugh of one not swayed by the visible obeisances of millions. Crowds or no crowds, he would still be the same Baba, undefined by the vicissitudes of the world. Certainly he was not too over his depth, by all the coming fanfare, not to care a mite about the feelings of insignificant little gatherings of people.

Baba satirized some of the illustrious people who were coming, and pointed out how men can so easily become bound up by the conventions of the world; aspirants too can be slowed by the number of claims they lay upon the world. "Single man walking has two legs," Baba said wiggling two fingers in the air. "A man and a wife are four legs. Now man goes slowly." This time Baba used four fingers. "Then there are children, then grandchildren, nephews, nieces—many legs, go very slow like a caterpillar." He laughed ironically. I suddenly had the horrible vision of people crawling all over me and tying me down like Gulliver. This illustration would be a good future ammunition against lust.

Everybody sopped up the feed-back. The gushes of Baba's energized attention proved that our fears of falling away from grace, when Baba was showing the impersonal mode, were unfounded.

Not that some people hadn't fallen away. There were a few public examples, and everybody knew it. Gurus have been known to cut people off. Hilda told numerous stories of how Swami Nityananda—Guru of Swami Muktananda—had not spoken to her at all during the first six months that she came out to Ganeshpur to see him.

I had been having problems wondering whether I was on track or not. It seemed as though my mind had been shoved into a narrower place of constant self-absorption regarding my moment to moment staying in the will of Baba. If my inner "onlooker" sensed an attitude of surrender to Baba, I felt assured that I was on target.

Due to the complexity of the inner navigator, a visible confrontation with Baba was a high order feed-back concerning one's progress and direction.

For a while Baba turned into an Uncle Remus unwinding nursery school allegories about love, suns, and flowers. Then things began to tighten up again as we sensed a spiritual I.Q. test coming on. "God, *Om*, is like a giant current of electricity. It goes through all the different wires and bulbs. Man is like a bulb. Each bulb a different capacity, giving off different brightness. One man is a five hundred-watt bulb," and Baba pointed to an old Indian in the room—just to illustrate the example, or was he doing more? "Another man is four hundred-watt bulb." And like an arrow in the heart, Baba pointed to me as all the Americans stiffened, especially Herman. Gill was three hundred, Jai two hundred, right down the line until Herman. We still waited for Herman, who Baba finally rated as twenty-five watts. It must have been a Christmas tree light because Herman turned into a pimento again, at times grinding his teeth.

While Baba bantered with Jai, Herman's eyes still flashed, singling him out. Jai went on obliviously, asking questions and gesturing in the air. Michelle appeared irritated that she was still being ignored, while Jai was allowed to sing a song about Lolita Devi, after he had asked whether it was allright to continue worshipping her as his chosen deity. After two frantic stanzas that could be heard outside, Baba halted Jai as Gill impatiently looked up at the ceiling. Baba gave a tolerant chuckle in Jai's direction then switched to Herman.

With patient chiding, he shook his finger at Herman and said, "Too much talking." Baba flapped his hands making blah-blah quacks in the air. A little exasperation entered his tone seeing that Herman's irritation had not subsided. "Going around talking to everybody, mind restless, very restless like a monkey. Here is some advice; keep quiet, talk little, and speak only sweet words." As Herman protested in defense, Baba shut him with a tolerant "Ah!" This happened several times more before Herman got the point.

The ripples of agitation in the air were soon smoothed away as Baba dismissed the tiny moods that still lingered. Immediately a waterfall of positive force emanated from him, quickly transfiguring us, as we realized once again the unaccountable value of each private second in Baba's presence. He kept dishing it out as the final minutes ticked by, adoring us, almost swooning over us with an innocent open-heartedness. The old coloured mammy in him smiled from ear to ear as Baba told us again, "Love is sweet," with unaffected abandon. For a moment he was somewhere between Ethel Walters and Aunt Jemima.

"You are hungry, want some sweets, *prasadam?*"

"Oh yes, Swami," we nodded as Michelle's voice chimed a little louder and higher than the others. Gill's eyes half-shut in a contented gratitude.

Baba's sleeve went up, and he leaned out over the others. I gripped the arm of his chair, looking closely from his side. On the final wave of his arm, a baseball-sized object appeared in his hand. The same familiar ionized force hurtled through the room like a sonic boom, the instant it appeared.

People leaned back muttering under their breaths as Baba looked around smiling to indicate what fun it was to share. I came to my senses when I felt his elbow leaning down on my arm, which was still running along the arm-rests of his chair. "Open your hands, Rowdie."

I rose up on my haunches making a bowl with my hands. Baba crumbled the ball up into a soft gravel that quicly filled both hands. "Ladoo. The sweet is called Ladoo. My workmen work very fast." Baba laughed knowingly as he heard a mind-blown "Yes, Baba."

Baba had everybody stand in a circle as he and I went around. Baba would scoop out a fair-sized proportion for each person, and then bid them to eat. Then he had me eat the rest, patting me on the back as I licked the last traces off my hands.

As we were prepared for Baba to open the door and usher us out, he announced "special grace," waving for us to sit down again. He went over to a velvet curtain, and stood halfway through it "Private interviews." A thunderous "om" suddenly issued from out of the prayer-hall just on the other side of the wall. It was the eleven-thirty bhajan, and we were being held over. A considerable breach of the normal routine, just for us! I smiled at Anthony, and got a merry twinkle back.

A familiar nervous anaesthesia filled me as Baba's eyes radiated from the velvet-draped portal. I was the first. He opened the curtains to let me in, then slid them shut. We stood at the bottom of a compact little stair-well that led up to Baba's private suites. The sound of the adjacent auditorium gave me the feeling of being within the bellows of a huge organ.

In my *continuum* of private moments with Baba, I had thus far made a considerable leap of faith. Especially during the last private interview a week back. So far there seemed to be no ceiling on the limits of his kingdom that he was willing to bestow on the faithful. And both times earlier- he unleashed a slightly more dazzling glimpse of his supernature. Perhaps he knew that I was not unimpressed by sheer power, nor was I aloof and beyond signs and wonders, and nor had I transcended the need for personal attention.

A week back, in this same stair-well, I made a bold pledge, spurred on doubtless by every kind of motive—the preciousness of what might be my final ticking second with a Messiah who could become so globally flocked as to be virtually unreachable within five years—therefore the remote possibility that I might earn apostleship under him contingent upon the most all-out response, and the knowledge that if I did have three magic wishes, I had better start fast, and not blow them on trinkets. I swallowed, looked into his eyes, and, "I want to love you with all my heart, soul, and mind, Baba. I want your will to be mine." He beamed. "Baba, I know you are god. You cannot fool me. Maybe others don't always know. . . but." Baba climbed up on the lower step so our heights would be equal, and embraced me. It lasted thirty seconds, while I constantly wondered what great invisible boons were being offered; cleansing of past *karma* purification and opening of the *chakras* or spiritual centers, I didn't know. But some kind of power was at work in the room, that I could certainly feel.

However as I stood before him this time, I was far less satisfied about myself. Whether it was my increasing alienation from Herman and Gill or such elementary crimes as oversleeping that morning, I wasn't sure. I just felt far from perfect, though our object as disciples was to learn the opposite.

"What do you want?" This was my second wish.

"Baba, I can't stand the evil in myself. Help me get rid of it and other obstacles, Baba. Anything that holds me back."

"Yes, yes."

"Baba, I really want victory this time, too many failures in the past. I want to be certain. No failure this time, there can be no failure, Baba." I felt so strongly about it, I held up my clenched fist like a battlefield gesture, saying "Jai" at the end which was Sanskrit for victory.

In patient understanding, Baba abstracted over my sins. "Too many bad thoughts, impure *sanskaras* (traits from past lives). Mind running around like a monkey. Thoughts of material things, anger, ego, jealousy, hate, quarrelling, and thoughts of girls. Not good." He wrinkled his face in disgust, in such a caricature of the usual expression, I wondered if the wavelength of the original thought impulse from overmind to avatar had mutated in transit.

Baba mounted the lower step again, as he had done on the last interview, smiling more like a playmate than anything else. He wrapped his arms about me, hugged tightly, and I pondered.

If the hallmark of this session with him was my own impurity, then I was presently under a spiritual magnifying glass as never before. And any kind of unexpected key could squeeze open a new skeleton closet. Baba's hug grew tighter. Then that subterranean spider of a thought crept out of some dark abyss. I almost repelled it before I fully sensed it, if that were possible. Nevertheless it got through in an icy quiet, voicing it speculated deep things, "Notice how his breathing has become a pant, deeper, more intensified. Feel his pelvis twisting. Why does he need to twist his peivis? Especially in the region of the loins. Accidental? No, not for one who is that conscious. I doubt a detail slips by him. Then, is this some strange divine passion that only the initiates encounter at the higher stages, and could that be some kind of . . . well. . . non-specific pan-sexuality, or bi-sexuality . . . or . . . or. . . am I twisting something that is innately pure into something that it is not due to my own suspicions and evils?" Yet Baba's pelvis kept nudging and twisting from my abdomen on down. Not hard but gently, almost as though it had the nerve-endings of a hand.

Yet if Baba were healing me or opening skeleton closets, it was not without some risk—and you only take risks with things you value. Then I feared that Baba might perceive my edginess—not that he shouldn't know if he is omniscient, but he might choose to dwell on it. And my high sin would be the primal insult to god, blasphemy in the most profound sense. The penalty for which might be expulsion from his presence. Yet, could he in love test me beyond my capacities, knowing I would stumble?

I felt an electric flash of self-conscious anxiety as Baba broke the hug. He held me back and looked penetratingly into my eyes, asking, "What's wrong, you do not like it?" Then I knew that I could not possibly bail out now, or call his cards. For I would hang nowhere in space with insufficient evidence to satisfy me either way. And I would go through life without a way of ever knowing for sure who or what he really was with the perennial question, "what about his miracles?" hanging in mind. And certainly a hug was not a bad a cliffhanger as the least of the initiatory rites of the Himalayan nights of the rishis, or the heat yogas at Lhasa, and probably all panned out as angel's dreams anyway.

"No, Baba, I like it very much. Great gift, great privilege."

"You are not pulling hard. Very weak hug. You do not like to hug?"

"Baba", I justified, hoping I had some ground left not to back out, "I was afraid to hug too tightly, maybe some discomfort for you."

"No, Rowdie." In an instant we were embracing again until he was satisfied. I really locked in giving almost a chest-crushing squeeze. His pelvis moved far less, still it moved. I wished I could just shoot the whole area with novacaine and forget about it. Maybe to a saint walking in, it looked like the gates of heaven opening. But to someone without the pellucid heart of a shepherd the scene juxtaposed ironically in my mind, it might look quite bizarre. Where for a second, to the untutored mind, the divine might hinge closely to some incredible scene out of a work by Goddard or Truffeaut.

Baba looked content, and I felt relieved, if not on the brink of a new breakthrough in understanding. I was now ready to suspect my own sin before I would his, in any but the most precarious of events. And that was the way it would have to be from now on. The curtains opened and eyes glistened back from the dark corners of the room in ravenous wonder. It had been a long interview. Soon the others were whisked through, and we were let out into the bright sunlight before a massive crowd who sang out and looked at us in awe. To my right, leaning against one of the porch pillars was one of the familiar young ushers, a servant and attendant of Baba's when school was not in session. Frozen against the pillar, he resembled some pristine marble sculpture of Adonis. He gave me a cherubic grin which I returned with a "how ya doin, trooper" wave, wondering if he was on a sufficiently high plane of awareness to have sensed my growing discipleship.

Later that day, I decided to go to the old *mandir*, the first ashram where Baba started his mission as a teenager. Maybe a mile down the road towards the actual village of Puttaparthi, it was not much more than a whitewashed adobe building closed into a compound by flagstone walls.

On the advent of one of the greatest festivals of the year, and with the day's interview still ringing in my ears, I felt pressed to get my hands into the soil to try for more than just a superficial taste of what was going on. Certainly the thrust of my experiences so far put an added seal to my burden. From every slogan I had heard, I knew that it was a folly to try to understand Baba, but I felt compelled to. I knew that what clues there were at the *mandir* would not magically widen my comprehension. But it was a good starting point. Time, I suspected, was the only true touch-stone that would give the overview that I was trying to grasp.

The afternoon waned into a grey twilight as I stood in the *mandir* after two hours of searching, with more questions than answers. The building itself was ramshackle of rooms that had all been added on to what was originally just a shed. Sandal paste and rose perfume seeped through the masonry, and crept across halls and rooms. *Kum kum* dust and rainbow powders streaked and splotched the walls, which were the backdrop of a photo exhibit of hundreds of pictures of the young Sai Baba.

A number of old women in the backrooms kept the temple up, making daily sweets, ceremonial offerings of flowers, and going through daily rituals, perhaps hoping that all this would bring their forlorn young Baba back. Patterns of flower petals mosaiced the outside walkways as similar patterns of coloured powder laced under the front porch where sat a large stone shiva lingam. Yet artistically it was all bankrupt. Like every village temple I had seen, there was a certain sloppiness that offended an inbred occidental sense of orderliness, as though each effort in the stark heat was the final mile of a marathon runner squeezed out through the very last ebbings of energy.

As I examined picture after picture, some faded, some out of focus, or hand coloured, one theme predominated like a pungent nectar. And that was the uni-sexual godlike beauty of the youthful Baba. "Cultural variable" rang out in my mind, while the more prosaic side of me protested with a stubborn fearful respect for the hard line between the sexes. A line that was a sacred ordinance of god whose violation or perversion didn't promise a new Eden but an abomination of the natural order.

A philosophic voice of authority answered this gut response; "Among men this cold and hard division is necessary and constant. But if you want to apply such a standard to demigods and avatars, here is where the difference of the sexes is another language of obsolete meanings. Obviously Baba is beyond single gender." The voice eulogized, "He is a composite of the highest attributes of both principles, male and female; strength and beauty, gracefulness and power aggression and passivity." I finally heard my mind agree, "Ah, yes, Siva-Shakti."

But this argument didn't change the photos on the walls. As I spotted a picture of dainty long-haired Baba reclined on a couch like Jean Harlow, I mused, "Why is it necessary, and what does it prove?" Maybe this just happened to be the way the local Indians could relate with divinity when it came to them on a personal level.

In another picture, Baba was being carried through the streets of a small village lying upon a large, flower-decorated palanquin. He waved as the throngs showered him with either confetti or flower petals. Another picture was a three quarter view of Baba with one hand resting on a hip and the other one waving goodbye. It could have been a *Saturday Evening Post* cover in the early 1950's of a negro mammy in Starkville, Mississippi, waving the kids off to school.

But the most formidable picture I had to contend with was one of Baba dressed as a goddess. This time, smiling as always, he waved with arms bedecked in women's bangles, wore earrings, a necklace, with a red *kum-kum* dot in the center of his forehead. And instead of his robe, virtually the only thing he ever wore, Baba donned a silk sari, and smiled almost coquettishly.

And this brought me close to the point I was at when I first heard of Baba and read a book about him on the train from Delhi to Bombay, in late November. It was entitled, *At His Lotus Feet*, and contained 108 pictures of Baba, many of them now hanging in the *mandir*. My temporary hang-up came at about 1 a.m. while I was musing through it, propped up on one of those planks they call berths. Finally I saw a picture that was so effeminate that it triggered a portion of my thinking apparatus that I generally label, "The area of my brain that thinks in Redneck Logic." I finally had to say it aloud, lapsing into a soliloquy that brought me a considerable audience, as I got off the berth, leaned against the wall, held the book out and said, "Either this dude is the most cosmically innocent, unaffected, and pure being I have ever seen, or the most unbelievable closet-queen passing itself off as a love-child, that has ever been perpetrated. Man, this pose sure looks trashy." After that my movements didn't exactly go unnoticed as at least fifty passengers waited for the next proclamation.

A similar struggle was going on now, with different parts of my mind warring; Redneck Logic Vs. the Erudite Transcendent Thinker. Redneck Logic started exclaiming in "boy, oh boy" fashion. "Man, I sure hope that ain't a homo. That looks an awful lot like a fey gesture. Probably just waitin for the troops or some cowboy to come along . . . ." Then the Erudite Transcendent Thinker countered, "You're desecrating the unfathomable, you spiritual Cro-Magnon. Such thoughts are a frightening index of how far you still have to go to even see the light ahead. You should realize and repent from that whole cancerous level of thought. Surgically remove them before they exempt you from discipleship under what may be one of the greatest avatars in the world's history. Imagine ridiculing Christ's nose." But Redneck Logic retorted, "You've cut off your gut sense, you transcendental idiot. You've so over-cerebrated around your natural thermostat of right and wrong, that you're calling white black and black white."

Not twenty-four hours later, Redneck Logic had been weakened, indeed overwhelmed by the sheer drawing power that Baba had. For acres, extending out in all directions, straw-mats and suitcases lay as far as the eye could see with no more than an inch at the very most between them—around the prayer-hall, in and around the metal auditoriums, in the huge side compound of the Vedic school and luxury suites, up the hill where the hospital stood, and on out into the fields. The land had become a field of human bodies, where units of people, presumably relatives, would congregate in their own little patches of several square yards. Kasturi, Baba's number one secretary and writer in residence, smiled like a proud grandfather, as he looked out at the masses from his private porch. Awed visitors gaped and saluted him, some trying to touch his feet as if he were Baba. We watched a long black Sedan pull in the entrance as Kasturi commented, "He happens to be a Bombay millionaire. But what does it matter? He too will sleep on the ground with all the others. From the poorest peasants to the wealthiest magnates, under Baba, they are all the same, and have equal rank." Sure enough, the Bombay millionaire unrolled his mat on the ground right beside his car.

And nor was it only the Indian elite who had to humble themselves in the presence of Baba. That evening, as brigades of buses rolled in and lined up on neighbouring fields, Vickie, Anthony, and I strolled down the swarming outside road, and entered one of the less seedy local restaurants for a snack. While Anthony ate a *masala dosa*, a giant pancake stuffed with fried onions and peppers, he told us how John Lennon and Yoko Ono had quietly arrived for Baba's birthday festival on 23 November. A delightful sense of destiny filled us as it became clear that neither of the two illustrious pop stars even remotely influenced Baba to seek them out or deviate from his usual course. In fact he had shown far less interest in them than he had in us. They sat and sat in the multitudes, just like everybody else, Baba smiled at them, but that was not enough.

Lennon expected an interview. Gill was about the only foreigner there at the time, so John and Yoko seized upon him. Gill patiently shared what he could with aloof authority, undoubtedly blowing their minds because almost nobody came on to them, John Lennon and Yoko Ono, with that sort of indifference. They treated Gill like an equal; his manner remained unchanged. They may have even become somewhat disarmed by then, and sullenly curious about the authenticity of the place. It they didn't count, it might even be real. But if the ashram had that kind of integrity, where was their bartering power? They were like rich kids in the Olympics where dad could no longer buy them first place. They had no staying power, and both left. Lennon felt slighted. And this outweighed his curiosity in Baba's miraculous powers. What blinding pride, we concurred. And what presumption to walk away from such truly deep things and heavenly mysteries as were here, and not bat an eyelash.

The following morning, the day of the festival, I was soon caught up in the confluence of people heading for the large metal shed. It was expected that about ten thousand pilgrims could fit into the large structure, cooped up along the floor in sardine-packed rows. As I shuffled past the side of the prayer-hall towards the central compound in front, I glimpsed something or someone that looked like an angel. It had just entered the side gate behind me. Head and shoulders above the Indians, this walking lighthouse had a flare of red hair that was as much of a shock in south India as the sudden appearance of a Watusi warrior in Grimstad, Norway. He was swarmed by convection currents of people immediately. Then he vanished from view as the same currents channelled me beyond the six-sided festival building towards the side of the auditorium.

Soon a line of ushers, all upper class Indians with armbands and badges, spotted and rescued me from the river of bodies. They let me into an open area that they had roped off near the front of the vast open shed which had been packed with bodies since the early hours of the morning. Packed, that is, except at the very front, where stood the V.I.P. entrance that they were guarding. It was for special guests whom Baba had blessed with the honour of getting absolutely front-row seats beneath the rather wide stage. The sexes were divided down the middle by a thick red woven jute carpet mosaiced with flower petals.

As I entered, the view of the crowd was breathtaking. Yet despite the huge mass, supersaturated with people, and still engulfing more of them, the roped-off front area was bare. It went back thirty feet from the stage, was covered with Indian carpets, and was the equivalent of the royal box at Wimbledon. At its edges, on the other side of the rope, quivered a flowing lava of people. An usher directed me to sit at the very front, right below the center of the stage. Undoubtedly it was the most envied seat in the whole auditorium, right below Baba's microphone, where the jute carpet met the stairs that Baba would go up on. It was almost too ostentatious. It was like driving a Rolls-Royce to a small-town Georgia picnic where the mayor is mighty proud to be driving a ten-year-old Cadillac. The sort of Rolls-Royce that's just been flown in after a jaunt through southern France, and just the sort of thing that small-town southern *cremede la creme* don't want to see. I would soon learn that to many high-born Brahmin devotees, I was a similar threat. However, the final priceless statement was that may unique seat was a gift of grace from one worshipped as god incarnate, the hem of whose robe, this crowd would give practically anything to touch. And he had invited me to share in his glory.

The air exploded in the thunderous screams of Cape Kennedy as Karnatic horns wailed away, followed by sharp drum-beats. Then came the Vedic chants of a long procession of school kids, and then the priests. In the outside brilliance could clearly be seen this human train escorting Baba, and moving towards the central entrance of the auditorium. In front of Baba was a gigantic behemoth adorned in mirrored tapestries, braided cords, and saddled in elegance. It was Gita, Baba's elephant. As wealthy Indians filtered in quietly beside me, tiptoeing up from the V.I.P. entrance, I learned that by Baba's side and holding his umbrella was Governor Dharma Vira, the diminutive Governor of Mysore State. The umbrella shone over Baba's head as the classic Puranic sun-umbrellas seen in the traditional captions of the gods and avatars—Krishna on the chariot, Rama with a drawn bow, and so on. Baba's gown shimmered with a brilliant red, as his hair, more voluminous than ever, encircled his head like a halo as the sun ran through each strand of hair. He was less human and more godlike than ever before. The crowd inside and outside surged in hysteria as Baba passed by. People raised hands in prayerful *namastes*, and many lunged across on the ground to touch his feet. The elephant caravan and the Vedic boys parked by the side of the auditorium, and the hall fell into a dead quiet as Baba entered. Karnatic horns still screamed eerily away in the background.

Baba was in the impersonal mode, scanning the audience and smiling out at generalized quadrants, rarely if ever, singling anyone out. I turned around and looked up just as Baba was behind me. A wave of force rolling down the carpet, his eyes shining like two discs. Lo, he left the impersonal mode—smiled, twinkled—"special seat, special seat," mounting the stairs with gymnastic leaps.

Right beside me, to my left, sitting behind three microphones with harmoniums, cymbals, tablas, and tambouras was a cluster of closely packed men coiled up, and ready to explode. They were the *bhajan* singers. An energized live-wire resembling a cross between Clark Kent of the Superman comics and Henry Kissinger got the whole hall rolling with freight train intensity, with two vibrant, excellently controlled songs. After a while the women had the floor for one song, and then it alternated between the men and the women. Baba paced the stage gracefully, occasionally stopping to weave his hands mysteriously through the air. Then sat down on a silver and tiger-skin throne. For ten minutes he kept timing, smiled, gazed out, or narrowed his eyes and even shut them, sometimes leaning his head back and clutching his hair. The women quietly reacted each time. Suddenly Baba arose, and went to the center of the stage where now stood the large silver statue of Shirdi Baba sitting on the coils of a huge snake, which at the top became an urn with a Siva Lingam—the serpent's head had been removed. The priest stood in the background, while Mr Kasturi picked up an amphora-shaped vase—the size of a large flowerpot.

Songs rolled by as Kasturi raised the vase upside down directly over the statue. The singing became louder. Suddenly Baba thrust his hand up into the vase, making the same circular motions inside the vase normally associated with his materializations.

The live-wire singer beside me took control, interrupting the other singers in mid-song. With clarity and great power, his voice pierced across the entire auditorium as the whole audience took part, clapping ferociously to the rip-roaring tempo and chanting in full body.

Immediately a steady fountain of grey ash cascaded out of the vase, on and on and on, through several songs. The only break in the flow was when Baba stopped to change hands. A small mountain of powder rose around the silver figure, waist-high, and higher as clouds filtered out over the stage across five or ten front rows of the audience covering everybody in a light frost. Out of the waterfall of ash came little hailstones bouncing off the figure and on to the carpet, occasionally rolling off the stage. The women would scramble to get them; gems, cardamom seeds, and crystals of rock sugar, hungrily eyeing the stage but fearful of displeasing Baba.

Baba yanked his hand out of the vase, spun around and left by the rear stage. The volume of powder was several times that of the vase. The lead singer surprised me again with what appeared unusual liberty around Baba, leaping up on the stage and following Baba behind the curtains. Again the other singers took over. In the flood of excitement I craned my head around to study the hall. The once empty reserve section was now full to the brim around me.

Eyeing the fourth row back, I flinched automatically as I locked eyes with the angel creature. The face was strange—pale, sensitive, and almost feminine in a Raphelite sense. Within the chestnut-auburn eyes lay distant enigmas, oscillating from melancholy to impish glee, cherubic innocence, then Mandarin wisdom, and finally sheer amazement. Still not entirely sure whether this being was some very tall unusual girl who stumbled obliviously into the male section, or was a male after all—which was beginning to look the case—I nodded as though to say, "Isn't this whole thing more incredible than any story-book?"

He nodded with reddening tearful eyes, this time resembling the archetypal Dicken's good lad, mistreated by the world, the fugitive of brutality, but forever gentle and innocent. A magnet behind me turned my head back around. Baba had returned wearing a clean new robe, and the Clark Kent singer bounded back off the stage next to me. He flashed me a quick cheerful smile.

While they had been gone, the priest and Kasturi had laboriously cleaned off the statue and urn, collecting the *vibhuti* on a number of silver trays. It was now apparent, however, that the ceremony was not entirely over. Several new vessels sat at the foot of the image.

As Kasturi poured a milky liquid over the figure, Baba washed it with his hands, resembling a midwife bathing an infant. Abstracted, dutiful, and pensive, Baba calmly took his time. My thoughts wandered to a conversation with Vijaya Laxmi, the ashram number two doctor, as the less glamorous side of his mission shone through this chore. An Indian woman educated in England, where she received an M.D., Vijaya Laxmi said, "I could spend days telling you all the miraculous healings Baba has performed, but even they, in their thousands, fall short of the mark. Because they say nothing of the millions of invisible things he does for his children that we never see and that he never receives credit for." And this included Americans and Asian-Americans such as Dr Thathachari, Professor of Dermitology at Stanford University Medical School, who had an incurable carcinoma. And when you are a staff member at one of the most advanced medical centers in the world, and even your colleagues give you the prognosis of being a terminal case, it's time to start surveying burial plots. But something called a miracle turned the dials instead. And Dr Thathachari came back from India and electrified his colleagues because no matter how many tests they ran on him, there was no trace of the malignancy at all. And when they heard that a little man in a red robe massaged him in the area, and he started to feel better, there didn't seem to be any textbooks around with any explanations.

The washing of the statue ended. Baba turned towards it, rotating his hands. Casually he held out his fingers as a brilliant ruby appeared. Then holding the gem, he pressed it into the metal where the third eye is allegedly located. Whether it sank into the metal or not, the ruby stuck.

Bells clanged, the *bhajans* stopped, the audience leapt up and sang the closing hymn of praise. This was the *arti.* The priest held high a burning censer as the chant ended in, "*Shanti, shanti, shantiiiii . . . Ommmm.*"

Baba left and the morning session ended.

8

The moment I was washed out into the side compound by the current of people, I saw "the angel" and a girl sitting on the steps outside my old luxury suite.

"Say, you look familiar," I exclaimed, laughing and feeling like St. Peter at the gate. We introduced ourselves.

Shaking his head with introspective profundity, in the John Geilgud tradition, "the angel" proclaimed, "He's god." The minute I saw him I started crying, and all I could say was, "He's god, He's god, He's god." It dawned on me that I had finally found what I have been looking for all this time. He shook his head with his mouth wide open. Baba had summoned an interesting apostle, the nephew of Marshal McLuhan, whose blazing mane of hair reminded me of a fusion of the Archangel Gabriel and the Spirit of Ireland.

"So Marshal's your uncle."

"Yup." The tone communicated that although Marshall Mc Luhan had been an enzyme of his own generation, with prophecies of the effects of multiplex media and sociological global unity, he hadn't pierced the spiritual barrier. "Nope, he's got some idea, but . . . ." Kerry guffawed knowingly, "he's still got his ego invested in being an arm-chair academician." There was a wry brilliance speaking behind Kerry's down-home jargon.

"Well, how did you get from what . . .Winnipeg . . .? Canada to here?"

They looked at each other as if to communicate that it was OK to talk. Janet, Kerry's wife, struggled for a starting point. "Well, we didn't exactly hear about Baba, we were guided here."

"How?" I asked hesitantly, sensing that it was only revealed to a few.

Kerry explained. "Well, since Janet was around five, she's been psychic. She often sees things through an area in her upper visual field, around her forehead, and it can be anytime, anywhere. It's like she had an invisible screen in her mind. In fact we call it the Screen. And these things appear superimposed over the things she normally sees."

Janet broke in, "It really used to scare some times when I was a little girl." She giggled reasurigly. Then proudly held up her head like Judy Garland marching to see the "Wizard of Oz." "But I got used to it."

I quickly established common ground, assuring them that they were not alone in this area. For years I had felt the odd man out, but suddenly every vein of intuition was proving correct as I came into the company of more and more kindred souls. As our ranks grew, we could lick our wound. "You know, we've had to brave an awful lot alone—things that would freak most people out. Everyone tells you you're wrong, but you've gotta go ahead anyway following that spool of intuition—maybe that's why so few get through in the end."

They nodded, beaming with smiles. They were also impressed with the fact that I had sporadically astral-travelled from the age of eleven—when I got the mumps in London—onwards. They both knew the symptoms too, reiterating what I told them.

I was beginning to see them more and more as two tender-hearted over-grown children, possibly a Hansel and Gretel. A context of innocence coloured the character of the dialogue between us, as Walt Disney exclamations became more and more common. This was a breath of fresh air that the entire sensitive side of me welcomed, going from dormancy to exuberance, as it became even more plain to me how adversely both Gill and Herman had affected me. "Come on, I want to hear the story," I insisted, beside myself with expectant curiosity.

"Well, hmmmm. To start out with we met a few years ago in a London tourist office. It was a close call though, you choose to look at it that way. There was a five-minute interlude, and that was it, and for two Canadians in one of the biggest cities in the world, just passing through town, and going opposite ways, eventually to return to opposite regions of Cannda, that was a pretty tight schedule. But we managed it though," Kerry reminisced good-humouredly.

Janet's eyes twinkled, "Something just gave Kerry the impulse to step off St. James Street and go in. He wasn't even planning to go into the tourist office. That's all it took. When I saw him and he saw me, our destinies unravelled just like that. We knew we were soul-mates immediately."

Kerry broke in, "Ya got a few weeks to listen?" grinning impishly behind an intentionally affected mid-western rural accent. "Naw, I'm just kidding. You're going to hear the whole story until you have to stop your ears up . . . haw, haw . . . . But the thing that got us here isn't too easy to talk about."

"Yeah, it's funny, we've told only one or two people. And they were very special friends we had known for years," Janet confessed.

"Don't feel you have to. But I must confess that I am interested in how all these bits and pieces fit together. It gets more mind-blowing all the time. You just can't imagine . . . well, obviously you can."

When Kerry got up to move, so we could all sit on the steps together, it was a bit of a shock seeing perhaps the second or third person in three or four months since I had come to India who was over six feet three. And with his abundant red hair hanging below his shoulders, it was really an imposing presence.

"Janet and I have been looking together since we first met. And we've done it as a team, sort of symbiotic. We've had inklings of the truth, but we've been mostly led gently through progressive stages."

"Did you ever try LSD?"

"Nope, we've done it all without any drugs—we both have an inbuilt alarm system against them."

"That's really off the beaten path. Amazing."

"At any rate, one stage we were called to go through pretty much brought us together. It was a few years back, soon after we were married, and suddenly we knew we had to go into the wilderness, and find out who we were. Which also meant extricating ourselves from the psychological game-patterns, and hang-ups of our folks. In all we spent seven bitter cold months in an abandoned cabin in the mountains high above Vancouver. We just stocked up on grain and vegetarian supplies that we got at a surplus depot. The cabin just appeared out of nowhere—on a completely desolate chain of mountains. You shoulda seen it, wood? stove, fire-place, outhouse—we had to chop wood, carry water, the whole bit. And when it's sub zero all the time, it puts you through some heavy changes. At any rate, as I was saying, it brought us together—I mean when you make that marriage vow, you don't realize what you're saying till the whole thing happens. It got so each knew what the other felt anytime of day or night. But it went beyond that—Janet and I both had a number of major psychic breakthroughs."

"Then suddenly we were told one day to up and leave. And that was it for the isolation phase."

One of them would utter something, stop, and the other would continue the sentence on. Kerry continued for a while, "Yup, within several weeks of the order to move on, we were on the way out of the country. We just packed, took care of a few details . . . went through some psychodramas with our families, who've never understood us . . . ." Janet went on from there, looking up and rolling her eyes with a sigh, "Yeah, never try to play by their ground rules or you lose every time. If you're firm enough, after a while they learn you really mean it. They mellowed out a little after a seven-month haul in the cabin, so when we told them we were on the way to the Greek Isles, they just accepted it. We love them but we just can't submit to their little models of how they would like us to be, and that has required cutting them off more than once."

"At any rate, within several weeks we were in the Greek Isles living in an abandoned house that we got for next to nothing."

"Not to sound like an idiot, but what did you do for money?"

"Oh," they looked at each other as Janet pointed her head at Kerry and said, "He inherited ten thousand dollars."

"At any rate, the Greek experience almost seemed useless. If you have any romantic visions about the Greek Isles, forget 'em. We had constant problems. Finally we were moved on. And that's when things really began to happen. Most of all, we met our guide."

"You see," Kerry interjected, "Janet's kind of medium. I guess it runs in her family."

"Yeah, but we didn't exactly know what was going on. It was just that now and then I would either see this guy, or hear a voice that sound like thunder, it was so deep."

"Wait till you hear Gill, it'll blow your mind."

"Well, maybe, but this guy's a spirit. Apparently he has been watching me since I could walk. I just never knew it. I knew something was going on but . . . I guess there's either a *karmic* connection or it's a plan by the powers that be that we can't imagine. I get a feeling though that he is preparing us for something, and it has to do with the coming spiritual age."

"Yeah," Kerry affirmed, "we probably either encountered him in a past life—when he was our guru—or it was on the other side; the death plane. I guess the best way to describe him is to say that he's an astral master, and fully enlightened at that. Maybe the only reason he's retained any degree of form at all, and not vanished into the Absolute is for the coming spiritual explosion. Sorta like a *Bodhisatva*."

"In fact," Janet chimed exuberantly, "He's a full-blooded Cherokee Indian. His name's Red Hawk."

"Ok, now what happened when you left Greece and travelled?"

'Well, the real breakthrough was in London when we met this highly developed psychic woman, well known in the inner circles. A lot of the power houses know her. Well, she knew immediately that Janet had considerable mediumistic talents."

"The upshot of all this is that she finally got some key people together for a secret meeting, all psychics and some of the greatest mediums in England, and they sorta carried the ball. Conditions apparently were perfect for me to go into a full trance."

"You shoulda felt the air surge, it was amazing," remarked Kerry. "All of a sudden Janet stiffened, the muscles in her body changed, and she looked completely different, like a giant hand in a small glove. She seemed twice the size. Her face was transfigured, she sat up produly, just like an Indian chief, and when she started talking, it sure wasn't her voice. The whole room shook. It almost blew me under the table. It was the deepest voice I'd ever heard. The lady asked it to identify itself and it said, 'I am Red Hawk.'

Janet good-naturedly imitated the voice just to show that normally the idea of a voice like that coming out of her five feet two frame was ridiculous.

"Well, Red Hawk announced that we were to go to India. That he had been guiding Janet all her life, and that conditions were now right for us to go, and that something or someone was in India who was higher than a perfect master. But he could not talk about it. Apparently we were not ready to hear more. He promised that he would protect us, guide us, and provide for every need. And before we knew it, getting things together flowed like a spell."

"Yup, in one or two days we found a Ford van for about a tenth its market-value. We furnished it, and that was our wheels." Kerry chuckled good-naturedly like the Quaker oats man, "Like clockwork we got shots, permits, you name it—we had everything except where we were supposed to go."

"But that was no problem, we just started driving. We went through France, Germany, Austria, Yugoslavia, Bulgaria, across to Turkey. . . then to Iran, Afghanistan. And that's where we were ordered to sell the van, in Kabul where there was a market. It was almost impossible to get a permit for India anyway."

"How did you know which roads to take? It's rough enough going from Washington to Cleveland without a road map."

"We were just told. I'd hear, 'turn there—take a right—keep on—stop for the night. Whatever Red Hawk said to me, we did."

"You were lucky one of the roadside gangs didn't turn you inside out, especially in Iran and Afghanistan. Practically every one I met in Delhi who did the overland route had a horror story stoty tell me. Until I saw a horror story; Danish couple that looked like Frankersteins. The wife had a gigantic dent in her forehead, and she was still half crazy from the sloppy work of an Asian nearosurgeon, and the wailing slimy wards where she lay semi-paralyzed for a few months.

Kerry and Janet both curled their mouths in horror, gasping. "Good thing Red Hawk was there."

"If something was rumbling up ahead, or if we sensed bad vibes, Janet would usually see a fine spider-web of high energy threads of light, sort of a tent, sitting off the road. We'd just drive right into the enclosed area, so none of the car stuck through. Only Janet could see them. Then we knew we were safe. And in fact nobody did ever bother us, or even appear to notice us for that matter. That was another one of Red Hawk's riggings."

Before I could respond Baba stepped out on to his rear balcony and that ended our talk. Janet gasped, apparently seeing something that she was unable to talk about. She looked up in quiet wonder for a long time, perhaps as a native islander would watch an erupting Krakatoa. When Baba receded, we left in silence, looking for a bite to eat.

By four o'clock, the crowd stretched out along the ground, filling just about every vacant space in the ashram there was within a fifth of a mile of the Shanti Vedica, Baba's specially built six-sided festival enclosure that resembled a giant Iranian bird cage. It stood in the main compound between the sheds and the prayer-hall, right out in the open.

As we sat within twenty feet of the enclosure, right by the center carpet separating the sexes, we could see the lines of people flow off into the distance—in the outside roads, on rooftops of distant guest-lodges, and even off on to some of the neighbouring hills. Kasturi's prediction of forty thousand people didn't seem too far off the mark at all.

Kerry craned his head around, and ran right smack into Jai. They exchanged smiles, one puerile and ridiculous with the Cherokee How sign, the other slightly amused. Breaking this timely meeting was a sudden deathly hush. Baba was out, and slowly weaving down flower-bedecked paths between lines of rock-solid people. Thousands of eyes glistened up as Baba smiled in full glory, resembling that seasonal "lilly of the field." Like that morning, he was coming in splendour—radiating more than usual, more youthful, beautiful, poised, blissful and dainty. Baba was the perennial saviour of love. Would't hurt a fly, but could vaporize a thousand suns.

A devotee followed Baba ten feet behind with a handkerchief. Everytime Baba materialized something for a pilgrim, he would run up with the handkerchief and hand it to Baba, who would then wipe the excess ash off his hands. Baba came around to the front of the structure and down the center path. He stopped right next to me, looking into my eyes and smiling, then went on, whisking my shoulder with his leg and robe. Kerry and Janet looked across at each other, eyes lit with spiritual fire, as I gestured to them afterwards, "Well, don't ask me why, but that's the way it's been between us. He gives me a lot of grace."

Baba then entered the hexagonal chamber from the rear and came into full view on the elevated platform. Baba's giant chair glistened with a large silver embossed "OM"—ॐ—on the upper third of its back. The enclosure was full of fluorescent fixures and wreathes of flowers. Sitting to the right of Baba's chair, slightly behind it on the floor, were the three honoured speakers; Sri Nakul Sen, the Governor of the State of Goa, Dr Gokkak, Chancelior of the University of Bangalore, and Dr Venkatava-, dhanlu, Professor of Telugu at Osmania University.

Mr Kasturi, the seventy-year-old secretary in residence, came up reverently to Baba, bowed down, and touched his feet. Baba patted him on the head. Kasturi got up and walked away unobtrusively.

Sri Gokkak, a pundit and sastric scholar, well-read in all the *Vedas* and *Puranas*, as well as what Kasturi termed "a master craftsman of the English language," spoke in articulate, profound authority. All the devotees knew of him, after all he had been speaking about Baba in key Indian circles for nearly a decade as well as writing a host of articles and books, invariably expounding philosophical truth. His ultra-Brahmin skin was sufficiently light for him to resemble a British ornithologist on an extended sabbatical in equatorial Africa. And with thick horn-rimmed glasses, his features were not far from the Disney anthropomorphism of the wise-old-owl-school-teacher.

Gokkak put everything on a vast scale. He discoursed on the spheres in the heavens, the distant antipodes of consciousness, and the divine realm of India's illustrious godmen, sounding like an expatriated Aldous Huxley. Tens of thousands of eyes glistened up in silent wonder, few of which were able to comprehend the English language beyond a few words.

Now and then Gokkak looked over in Baba's direction for a feed-back. He would receive a benign smile. Finally Baba gave him a polite little wave, indicating that it was time for other matters. He uttered a brief closing poem of praise to Baba which he had composed with the help of a large Oxford dictionary, bowed obeisantly, and reclaimed his place on the mat beside the Governor of Goa.

Baba with absolute poise and control, arose and looked across the audience with a broad maternal smile. Meanwhile a tall westernized young Brahmin wearing glasses and stay-press clothes, carefully crept over and adjusted Baba's three microphones, avoiding the high-pitched squeals of feedback. He then crept out and adjusted the power amplifier, and then flicked on the lihting fluorescent tubes, electro luminescent signs and all. Suddenly the rapidly approaching darkness leapt back from Baba's enclosure. The hexagonal chamber transformed into a celestial arcade.

Tonight, all over India, throughout ashrams and holy cities, the Saivite sect would be paying homage to the great lord Siva, god of destruction in the triune godhead, who was always portrayed with a half moon in his hair, a trident, sitting ash-covered in the full lotus, and eyes shut deep in *samadhi* as he sat atop Mount Kailash. Countless numbers would hold all-night vigils, fasting, meditating, and repeating the divine names of god. But those across India, who realized the avatarhood of Sathya Sai Baba, would dwell on his name and form, singing *bhajans* to him in family-halls, and meditating in their puja-rooms. Because he was considered to be Shakti-Siva—the male and female principles of the universe combined—to the Saivite sect, and the last of Vishnu's appearances as an avatar, Kalki, to the Vaishnava devotees, they both agreed that he was Narayana, god with human and divine attributes.

The estimated five million plus devotees of Baba all over India from Assam to Kerala to Simla, all hoped that tonight would bring the really great boon. That Baba's miracles on this plane would accompany invisible transformations, and bring them across the ephemeral dungeon to eternal life, the Upanishadic *sat-chit-ananda*—the being, consciouness, and bliss of the Absolute. Freed from their painful tragic existences, they would emerge like the monarch butterfly in spring into a state of awareness infinitely more ecstatic than the legendary paradise planes.

Baba's miracle could come anytime, like the uncontrolled spasms of childbirth. And the nationwide devotees were on the edge of their seats because of this. While either singing, speaking, or just sitting, Baba would exude either one or several egg-sized spheroids from his mouth that had been growing inside him, made of precious or semi-precious stone or metal—gold, silver, ruby, lapis lazuli, emerald, topaz, moonstone, or opal. Certainly their size alone would make a normal man unconscious from agony, if pulled up from his stomach and out of his mouth. This act was no more bizarre than any number of divine acts recorded in the Indian holy records. Certainly far less alarming than Kali or Maha Durga devouring heads, as though they were figs.

But the lingams were not just breathtaking stone Easter eggs, adored for aesthetic value. They were loaded with significance to every Indian in the land, regardless of caste or sect or region.

This was the seed-spore of the universe whose super archetypes spanned back into the creations of eternity past. They were also those muddy little stones around which the ancient nomadic primitives had danced near smouldering embers. The bhakti devotees worshipped them as divine concretizations, touching their head, hands, and feet to them as perennial fertility symbols—reciting Vedic hymns of praise dating back thousands of years at any one of the eleven ancient hallowed sites bearing lingams, allegedly planted by Siva himself. But for the Jnanis, Rishis, and sages of Advaita, the significance of the lingams —jumped from static points in the realm of dualism to causal principles. And Baba had stated this in speeches of years past. They symbolized that point in space-time where all aspects of "relative phenomena" go in and out of physical existence; on one side of the barrier is the illusion of multiplicity—physical astral, and causal. But through the elliptical creatrix is the vast silent "Static-Eternal." Westerners who were advocates of Buber called it "The Ground of Being," Gill called it "The Void," and Herman called it "Dat Place."

In the yearing adorations of a forlorn lover who has too great an abundance of love to contain, and whose mate is separated and tentative, Baba's voice filled the night air in resonant power. Baba chanted a sloka from the Bhagavad Gita (XVIII-66), stretching his arms like a bird of paradise:

Sarvadharman. . .parit-yajya. . .mem-ekam. . .sarnam. . .vraja.
Aham. . .Tva. . .sarva. . .papebhyo.
Moksha-yisyami. . .Maaa. . .Sucaaaahah.

The verse resembled the same wistful tune I had heard while in Rishikesh at the Maharishi Mahesh Yogi Ashram. Kasturi later translated the verse as saying, "Renounce all dharmas and take refuge in me alone. I will liberate you from all sins; grieve not."

Then Baba began a monsoon flood of highly charged Telugu phrases. Battery after battery inundated the audience. Baba's tone rose in power; at times it resembled snatches of the voice of Hitler in Leni Reijhenstahl's famous propaganda documentary, "Triumph of the will." Baba "the Lover" had become "the Teacher and Mighty Counsellor."

Kerry and I shivered in our seats, looking up at Baba for secondary clues and communications distinct and supplemental to the words that eluded us. In the translation the following morning, we learned that Baba's first words proclaimed, "I am not a human being; nor a god or superman. I am neither brahmin, nor kshatriya, nor vaisya, nor a sudra. Then you may ask who I Am. Well, I am the Teacher of Truth: I am Truth, Goodness, and Beauty."

After the speech had extended to forty minutes, Baba paused, looked at the audience, then fell back in his seat. He looked away, as though hiding great pain. Labour had begun. He convulsed several times, still trying to be as graceful as possible, took sporadic sips of water, and constantly wiped his mouth and forehead with a handkerchief. He hiccuped, winced, held the arm of his chair, and when possible, smiled reassuringly. The smile would then be interrupted by a hiccup or a sip of water.

Raja Reddy, the disciple who resembled Clark Kent, took over. With crystal presence of mind, he came from behind the scenes to shepherd the crowd by leading the audience in *bhajans*. He bent forward, only feet away from Kerry and me, eyes squeezed in intense concentration, and vigorously pumped his *harmonium*. The hand organ rang out and droned into the microphones, suddenly filling the air of the entire ashram, which was wired from end to end with speakers. Raja flawlessly chanted the opening Sanskrit phrase of one of the *bhajans*. Then with admirable grace and control, he sang like a speeding charioteer—nonchalant and joyous, yet coiling his energy into a powerful spring, as always, guiding it with great self-discipline. The song praised Baba as Siva, and after each refrain, the audience repeated it with absolute fervour, eyes glued to Baba the whole time.

On the third refrain, the song was barrelling along, *Siva, Siva, Siva, Siva Parti Pureeshwara, Shambho Shankara Sada Sivaaaaa.*

Several songs later, Baba gracefully stood up. Raja immediately brought his song to a halt, and readied his *harmonium* to follow whatever Baba was to sing. In sweet, almost defenseless tones, not nearly as demonstrative as the previous opening Sanskrit *sloka*, Baba chanted the opening of the song. He reminded me of a delicate flower as he sang about Krishna, almost mouthing the words in baby-talk, *Chita Chora Yesoda Ke Baal, Navanita Chora Gopal.* The voice was quite beautiful and provocative. That sweetness of character that I felt coming through the songs forced me to repent some of my impressions of Baba the day before in the old mandir. It was suddenly obvious that my suspicious had been a clear case of cultural projection. Where else, I asked myself, other than the twentieth century America, do you lose your faith in other people's values so extensively as to echo football locker-room talk almost automatically? And that was one price of being partially brainwashed by a nation of cynics, that even idealists had relapses. And instead of saying, "How beautiful," a line out of Lenny Bruce came out instead.

Fifteen minutes later, halfway through a refrain, Baba abruptly gagged, as though hit by a sudden wave of uncontrollable peristalsis. Back into the chair he sank after sputtering out a few more syllables. Resting his face in his palm, and leaning on the arm of the chair, Baba hiccupped, sipped more water, and continued wiping his face with the handkerchief. I couldn't tell whether he was wiping off sweat or ash, since quite often in the past, he had sweated *vibhuti* in vast profusions from even his forehead until it covered his robe.

Baba's head jerked in spasms, then he leaned back against the chair to control them. It seemed he was trying to hide the pain, perhaps intense pain. More heart-rending were his numerous smiles of reassurance that gently told us not to worry. That this was something he had volunteered to do, and could handle. It didn't so much as stir the smallest ripple in his true nature, it was merely a *lila*, divine play, taken on to rescue us, and reflect the vaster more universal pangs of creation that he was constantly going through from one side of the universe to the other. The lingam was the primeval particle of creation.

Yet more to the point for us, the benefactors, was that this indestructible man of steel was taking on the infinite torments that we deserved. His grace was covering our "karmic debts."

In a concentrated thrust, Baba pitched forward as though to vomit holding an open handkerchief before him. His head recoiled like a 120 millimeter cannon, and in an explosive gush a brilliant stone, larger than an egg, shot out of Baba's mouth on to the handkerchief. My stomach twitched automatically. Perhaps a wave of spiritual energy had been released at that moment, I wasn't sure.

Finally Baba held the object high so everybody could see it shine and glisten, then set it down on the table in full view, arose, spun around, and quickly left, disappearing down the rear steps, into the night.

The pitch of the *bhajans* mounted, and would continue throughout the night. Before Kerry and I left to hold our part of the all-night vigil, in meditation rather than *bhajan*-singing, we studied the lingam. Kerry guessed it was moonstone, I guessed either opal or emerald, and we could hardly wait to hear what Janet had seen during the whole event.

Under the street light of the ashram bank, Janet stood shaken and quiet. In an awe-filled whisper she told us that she saw an immense light the moment the lingam emerged. But that was all she was willing to disclose. We needed to be alone. I went up on the high rocky hillside in the pitch-black, to sit under Baba's tree of wisdom. Janet and Kerry walked off to sit in a large barren field.

The night for me did not pass easily. I used every trick I knew to stay awake, which meant that I did not spend the time meditating. I squeezed rocks, crawled around, lay in uncomfortable positions, held my eyelids open, and fought each attack of sleep as though it was a Mickey Finn. By five I looked like a blithering idiot, looking at the stars through one half-closed eye, rocking back and forth, and cupping one of my ears to amplify the sound from one of nearby speakers. Forgetting that Gill's tent was nearby, I almost fell right through it at one point as I was reeling around. That would have livened up the atmosphere considerably, leaving the Indians to ponder whether the Americans had imported a new type of yoga. By five or so, when the Vedic boys and the phantom ghost train started up, I knew the battle was won, but only marginally.

"The festival continued with Karnatic horns, discourses, giant gongs, and Baba *darshans*, of splendour and fanfare."

Four days later, in early March, right before Baba was to leave for Whitefield, his other residence in the neighbouring state of Mysore, he granted us one last interview. I didn't expect it, but longed for it more than ever. I was completely split down the middle on where to go. With my large suitcase and typewriter in storage at the Kendra in Delhi, and charter ticket about to expire, I was still going through the motions of leaving the country by the six-month visa deadline.

By the morning of the interview, Gill had already left for Whitefield to recleim his old cottage where he could meditate in the absolute quiet of a semi-barren farm. Herman also had left, by Baba's command, to wait in Whitefield before returning to the "householder's" duty of business and family. Baba would give him a goodly number of going away interviews. That left a jubilant Kerry, Janet, Vicky, Anthony, Jai, Michelle, and me. Plus four new people who, like Kerry and Janet, had appeared during the festival.

They were a scruffy lot of *beedie*-smoking freaks, with the kind of hustly tone that's a hallmark of people who've been on the road for a long time in India. The two women, sisters in fact, were in their mid-twenties. Though looked as though they knew every trick and psychological angle in the book. Worn to a frazzle and despondent, they both had been on the road for far too long "India," the younger sister, had been on the road in India for well over a year, travelling with sadhus and freaks, and passing through every head-center and holy, town on the map. Marsha, the older sister, had been in India for only six months. But before that, she had done considerable travelling on her own through the far east—Hong Kong, Singapore, and long before that, Hawaii, where she was a cocktail waitress and girl friend of some of the Mafia.

Michelle had known the two girls in New York, and wasn't too happy about seeing them first. And when they started eyeing some of her clothes and commenting on how nice they were, she became even more suspicious. In a token gesture, Michelle finally gave them several blouses. Marsha, the older one, was as tough as nails, and was the spitting image to me of what Annie Oakley must have looked like. She was a big girl too. Afraid that they might manipulate Michelle into some kind of psychological subservience, or out-tough her, or had other than spiritual motives for being at the ashram, I ordered them out of the room one day, and firmly let them know what was going on. They lightened, Marsha's tough edge went away, and they seemed to be relieved. And all of a sudden I felt a new kind of responsibility for them. They deserved Baba as much as anyone, if not more, and seemed completely genuine in their search, which like mine, had started way back in their past. "OK boss," Marsha beamed. I liked them both. In little time I began to see that they had hearts of gold.

As for their travelling companions, Hans and Benno, two Germans, I kept a hard distance. I almost outrightly disliked them.

The two Germans were even more "spaced out" than the women, hypertensive and peculiar-looking, even for chronic freaks. Hans, bald on top and long on the sides, reminded me of a psychotic German scientist with huge fearful blue eyes blown up to silver-dollar-size behind wire-rim specks. Benno had a mop of frizzy brown hair, and wore coke-bottle glasses, twice as thick as Hans. He resembled an owl. Both of them wore south Indian dress, semi-bare chested, beads, and what not, and instead of pants, they were wrapped up in dhotis. Wherever they went, they seemed to sneak around, and Hans absolutely refused to look me in the eyes. But as soon as Baba opened the door of the interview room, they grinned from ear to ear like little kids.

The minute I walked in, Baba grabbed my shoulders, and sat me down in what was now the customary place to the left side of his chair. I wasn't going to protest. Baba addressed many of the stories directly to me, as though we were having a private conversation, and were the only two people in the room. Then he would look up and share it with the others. He often slapped me on the back.

After an hour and a half of interview time, we had already been given far too much in terms of our expectations. Baba's oozing ecstatic force had surrounded us in a lake of honey, and we were almost reeling from intoxication. Just as we were about to get up and leave, he looked me in the eye, and asked, "Private interview? You have questions?" And I did, because I was starting to panic about where to go.

The dark velvet drapes shut behind me and Baba looked searchingly into my eyes. "What do you want?" The question came with the force of a psychic whammy.

On a high precipice of choice, I automatically, went through several gear-shiftings of awareness that, for all intents and purposes, was completely out of my hands.

The problem of staying in India had now long disappeared. The priorities were suddenly totally different. I had entered the spiritual market-place set to bargain over tables and chair, unaware that I had entered an exclusive arena where bids for cities and towns go by almost unnoticed as kingdoms, empires, and dominions balance, then shift, and dance as assemblies of concentrated thought move them across the board like shuffle-board plates.

Something helped me talk. "Bàba, I offer you my life as a son, as a servant, for your direction, to have completely and do whatever you will."

As though a covenant had been made, "I am also your property, sir. Yes, I am also your servant," Baba replied.

Still nosing up a waterfall like a Canadian salmon, my quest cannot end until the full tribute is consummatad. I must acknowledge my deepening faith. "No, Baba. You are *Mahapurusha*, the Lord of the Universe, within that body. You can't fool me. I am your property, your servant. I am you. I want to be an Arjuna, Lord."

We embraced automatically. His wiry cloud of hair surrounding my face, I wondered what kind of deep soul-cleansing was going on. Then huge force surged from Baba to me, almost visibly sparking. "Guru *kripa*, *shakti paat*, power purification." I thought.

I stood hugging that same unreachable Messiah who stood atop the pagoda, whom tens of thousands came to see and wept, just for a glimpse, or a touch, or a smile. The same one who sang with such incredible tenderness, before miraculously creating the seed-pod of his creative love. A still, musing voice entered my head. It spoke of great things in the tables of fortune. A prince is being crowned into life and glory, a once and future king. Then a moment's hesitation. How painful to presume wrongly; to be projecting now would be a terrible revelation. The voice responds, "What greater sign could you possibly ask for?"

Baba broke the embrace and held me back. "Do you want a wife?"

Oh, god forbid. What had he picked up, some lower *chakra*-force sparking away like a dripping faucet that can't be completely shut off? Had he sifted through my fantasies and found one too many? After all, it was only a physical phenomenon like a runny nose. Nothing that a little grace couldn't abolish. And as for the romantic loves, well, I had pretty much reached the lethal dosage. They taunted but could never satisfy, and disappeared like mirages whenever you came too close. What a peculiar form of sentimental idolatry. My final romance, in my early twenties, I squelched by hammering the pipes of my mind into autonomy—if you didn't need anyone, the spell vanished. That same love had to turn towards the quest for truth. Yet after all these changes, my real fear was that my ideal mate, would appear after all. And then the going would be much harder as that rippling dam of love stored up for her would still have to be surrendered as fare for passage.

The response was on the tip of my tongue, "No, Baba, No."

"You are sure you don't want wife?"

I reeled inside. Women, I did not need. My happiest moments were always when I was not dependent but blissfully autonomous. In some unfallen heaven world of perfection without the machineries of complex psychological evils and defects, I might still hold back from making the jump, and accept the full implications of the vows for a mate. But maroon myself for another million years, in an age of militant defeminized trends, and women who fear or refuse to accept womanhood, forget it. In that sense, James Thurber and Divorce Court had been spokesmen for the times and prophetic voices. Then I pictured an array of past incarnated wives whom I did not remember nor they remembered me. And no matter how epic or beautiful it had been at the time, what difference did it make? "Shut'em out." screamed the inner voice.

"Baba, I don't need to get married, do I?"

"No, Rowdie, there is no male or female. In the end, there is only god."

In accord with each time I had been in the stair-well with Baba, the "Om" in the neighbouring prayer-hall, one cinder-block's thickness away, struck the hour in the explosive rush of a runway during jet take-off. The discussion about a wife resolved abruptly. Baba had kept me beyond the magical hour. While five thousand remnants of the festival waited in the sun just for a glimpse of him, he was pouring over me.

Baba reached out to embrace me again, pulling me in strongly. The musing voice pondered Baba's comment, "There is no male or female." The embrace of Radha-Krishna, the avatar of the *Dwarka Yuga* and his lover, was the highest resolution of two polarities. And since the avatar was trans-sexual, his embrace of Arjuna was roughly equivalent, with everything but the basics taken away. Tradition, the voice reasoned, made Radha-Krishna lovers—it also made Arjuna-Krishna like brothers, or father and son, or teacher and disciple. Arjuna and Radha were both polarities, Krishna was forever the "changeless One without attributes." Now the musing voice likened the embrace with Baba with the meeting of cosmic lovers. God, and god, breaking the wall of *Maya* to merge.

Yet I couldn't quite tell who was in the male mode more, and who was in the female or passive. I always identified myself as distinctly and invariably male. And there was a feminine dimension to Baba, whom many devotees also worshipped as the divine mother. Yet he had an exceedingly strong male aspect as well. And avatars invariably came as males, after all.

Baba's nudging pelvis stopped. Then suddenly a hand unzipped my fly, with the facile smoothness of turning a doorknob, and went into my pants, as though it knew the location of each stitch of cloth and each zipper stub. Then, like an adder returning home at dusk, the hand burrowed into the mouth of my underpants.

If Truth required these kinds of impossible labyrinths, I had already made my vow to see it through, and was fully committed now to going all the way. Some day I would see the overview one way or another. I stood my ground, and tried not to noticeably flinch.

The voice of reason was getting a little rattled. It began to summon every scrap of my accumulated knowledge and latent intelligence. It wanted to protect Baba's integrity like a mother whose son has been accused of burning down the mayor's barn. "When they line you up in an Army physical, and check each draftee for Hernias, is the doctor trying to homo you or the other draftees, or is he busy trying to make sure that you don't get killed on the front lines? And if Baba is who he claims to be, it is inconceivable that he would stoop to anywhere near the impurity of the average army physician. Obviously if you're not getting married, he may be helping to close up some rather old troublesome doorways. And he may even be sublimating the enery to higher levels. And that can take some Hatha Yogis fifty years of concentrated meditation."

Baba's hips continued to shift again as he squeezed a rather limp organ, that had about as much interest in raising up as it desired a bath in liquid helium. It was frozen out, and not even a legion of nude Arab women could thaw it out at this point in less than several days of total solitude.

Baba's rapid breathing did not exactly register lethargy or unexcitement. The voice of reason proposed, "He's cooling your heat center, taking on your sins, and purifying your lower *chakra*" However Redneck Logic also sat on the judiciary board, mambling subsurface before I could censor the embarrassing thoughts from leaking out. "Man, I sure hope all that squeezing is purification because if it ain't, Jack—and that's a strange way to be purifying it—you've picked the wrong guy. It'd be a lot easier if you'd just radiate the thing from outside my pants. Somehow it just looks bad the way you're doing it."

With a surge of will power, rather than blow it by panicking, jumping to conclusions and, consequently, pressing the wrong button at critical mass, I let my autonomic system take over, "relax, and float downstream."

But my mind was reeling at a lightning speed. I sensed that part of the test was not merely that I comply, but know positively, and see, the holy in Baba's act. The Indian scriptures had declared repeatedly, "anything done in total purity is without blemish," whether it be wiping a nose or opening the gates of the most holy. Therefore Baba was bearing this out by showing this essential non-difference in all actions and things. Once this teaching was truly believed, one would see the body of god behind a patch of fungus, a dead fly, or a brilliant sandy shore. Parallel to Crane's, *Red Badge of Courage*, you still had to be on the front line to finally know what your reaction to killing would be. Otherwise you might armchair philosophize forever, and yet, never know. Baba could ask me, "Do you trust me?" And I might reply, "of course," forever. But until I was given a wide open chance to suspect him or question his integrity, the depth of my faith would remain an uncertainty.

A minor voice interceded before it was quelled. "If there is no absolute standard to judge and anything goes right or wrong, how can you ever fully discern the genuine from the counterfeit? Other than a tenuous airy faith or a look of 'knowing', what concrete evidence can you ever go by? And how do you know that what you safely label a 'test', to preserve your faith, is not a slip by the counterfeit guru?"

Interrupting at top volume was the voice of an advocate, defending the accused with authority. "Baba himself is the final evidence. His love, his patience, and . . . his miracles. He has consistently demonstrated an innocence, a goodness, and a purity regardless of the audience. Mightier than any president or king, he has not been too proud to wipe your nose or pat you on the back. If you call yourself his property, and he has already told you that he is your property, why do you gladly surrender an arm or a leg, then recoil in horror when he chooses to take an ear or something else? What boldly spoken yet shallow faith. You might find the rigorous demands of discipleship eased, if you don't try to use rational analysis on the inscrutable mind of god. That is treading on hallowed ground." I was checkmated, and in a torrent of confusion.

I knew that even if I were given a thousand years to stand here in the stair-well, I still might not be able to resolve the present dilemma with its delicate balance of facts. Yet it seemed that all eternity rested on this one crucial moment, the moment of my verdict—to either believe in Baba far more than ever, or fall away entirely, and perhaps, remain confused for the rest of my life. And this made my mind boggle. It was nealy an impossible situation. But hold on, here was a clue to the answer. An impossible situation. Impossible in the sense that it was almost perfectly designed to the last atom to short-circuit my mind. And was this sheerly coincidental? Or was it the ultimate *Zen koan*, the supreme illusion, contrived by an omniscient cosmic mind, with all the perfect variables lined up, to stretch me to the limit, and break me of numberless habits of belief?—of which one of the most fundamental, as basic as salt in my blood, was the conviction that good and evil were absolutes. The eventual critical situation brought about to dispatch this would require the touch of neurosurgeon, otherwise I might end up like the frog, "at the bottom of the well."

The ideally timed *Zen Koan* dropped on a pupil by a master, by creating the perfect paradox of contradictions, brought about satori or enlightenment by initiating a chain reaction of self-consuming lies. That last lie to short-circuit was the ego, the sense of separateness, and finiteness, leaving nothing less than the infinite to take its place· But now that I was balancing on a high wire and, by no means, the final situational *Zen Koan*, the risks seemed enormous

I would either see the impossibility and contradiction in the very idea of Baba's having homosexual lust—the leap towards liberation—or the old habits of belife would win in the end. And I would dismount on a desolate halfway point of metaphysical confusion, perhaps doomed to wander into deeper spiritual labyrinths, with not a reference point on the horizon. Indeed, the stakes were frightening.

But the agitation remained, Baba showed every pant, every tremor of arousal. Why?

"Part of the props for the total existential dilemma," came the answer. How else, other than by the perfect situational dilemma, an art-work of circumstance to the very last stage prop, could my most ingrained misconceptions be challenged? My thoughts flow quickly through a breaking stress point; the situation here is a contradiction. He's using the thorn to remove the thorn. Good stacked over evil like a staircase to walk beyond them, where opposites merge, the new reference point.

The impasse breaks more; my belief in Baba's deity begins to overweigh superficial appearances. Too much at stake, too much to forfeit . . .it can't end in a shoddy little stair-well with a queer, not after all this, the years, the pieces stacked up. He can't be a queer . . . impossible . . . impossible. I have got to believe in him. The only way is forward, I have to follow him in blind faith. That's the answer.

The balance tips faster; of course—blasphemous accusations fading—lust contradicts Baba's nature. Therefore it does not exist in him. He cannot sin, because it is not in him to do so. Blind faith, a new generalized optimism enters the horizon. The verdict —Baba is innocent. A mounting sense of victory replaces the mental weight that had almost overwhelmed me with stellar force. I have changed in some way.

The boundary around my personality or mind no longer feels impermeable, like a protective shield or a one-way membrane. Something has been pierced. It is semi-porous; a sensation akin to fasting, or a fever, or an alkaloid hallucinogenic, or a lungful of Acapulco gold. Partially gone is that vestigial thermostat of duality, the puritanical conscience, forever hung-up on two dimensional interpretations. In its stead, a heady sense of freedom, a mellow exuberance. I am not more alive, necessarily, nor particularly more lucid. In fact gone is some of that former sharp edge of emotional sensitivity, or hypersensitivity. But there is now nothing to fear.

My legs continued to shiver just noticeably. Baba removed his hand from my pants and zipped my fly. The entire dilemma had lasted about half a minute. More tension left my lungs. It wasn't so bad, I thought, echoing those first words after once bravely receiving my first hypodermic injection as a very small child.

Smiling proudly, slightly flushed, Baba said, "Very happy. Go now." He waved with familial informality. And I passed through the curtains, stone-faced as twenty eyes, consumed with curiosity, looked up.

The rest of the private interviews with Baba were just token meetings, the curtains half-open the whole time. They sped by in about five minutes for everybody.

As the others filtered outside, I remembered, "Oh, Baba. Do you want me to go to Whitefield?" realizing the absurdity and needlessness of the question.

Amazed that I could think otherwise, "Of course sir, of course. You stay with me in Whitefield. You are near and dear."

Consistent with my pledge of turning my life over to him, "But Baba, my stuff is in New Delhi. It may take several weeks to go there by train and get my bags . . . ."

"Go tomorrow. Then come to Whitefield, Brindavanam. Then many interviews and lessons in *sadhana* for all foreigners. I will train you."

Baba's car left that night. That next morning, Jai, Michelle, and I left on the five a.m. bus to Bangalore city. Both of them had diarrhoea and mild fever. I was deep in a new level of silent contemplation. Our parting agreement, once in Bangalore city, was that they were to find a house which we would all share together, and I would join them around March twentieth.

9

After a fifty-hour train ride from Delhi to Madras—feet out of the window, coal-dust and smoke blowing in, fiery hot curries, monkey packs in village stations, a stretch of track in Maharashtra that transformed the train into a cast-iron oven on wheels—and a brief night at the Madras YMCA, I was on the final hub of the ride. Staring out the dining-car of the "Brindavan Express," India's fastest train, I was going from Madras to Bangalore. "Where's Whitefield?" I asked the conductor, hoping the train might stop there, a local town only thirteen miles from the main city of Banglore, where Baba's ashram was. "We are coming to it just now . . . . No, the express has no stops on the way."

The terrain of Madras State had resembled Utah in a drought. But Mysore was shining a little greener, true to its reputation. For over a hundred miles, we had passed Mysore rice paddies, wells, dry patches, and the usual primitive villages with water-buffalos and bare-chested natives. I pressed my face up to the glass, concentrating with full force. Whitefield blazed by in a flash, leaving only scanty after-images in my mind of mango seller's kneeling in the road, a nondescript rail depot, scant trees, dirt paths and roads, monkeys, a walled-in compound on one side, and a modern factory on the other. "Sai Ram," somebody uttered. We had just passed Baba's compound, but I could not remember anything standing out. Technically, neither it nor the "Whitefield railway station" were in Whitefield. They were in Kadugodi, a tiny village. The old British far community of Whitefield was several miles down the road, vacated of its days of glory since independence, and now settled with Indians and Anglo-Indians.

An hour and a half later, I was back, riding a three-wheeled auto-rickshaw.

Contrasting with the primeval wilderness of Puttaparthi, Bangalore exuded the spirit of contemporary progressive India. Having once been the summer home of the King of Nepal, "Brindavan" had several acres of well-kept garden in the rear. Within it, and separated by a gate and drive, was a two-storied stucco house with the distinct architectural flavour of a rambling oceanside home in Baja, California, complete with circular frosted windows of coloured glass, a front drive-in porch, Bougainvillaea and all. The remaining half of the compound was divided between the school and the public. The school buildings were clustered on the other side of the drive. The rest of the open compound belonged to the public; the shady tree-lined driveway from Baba's private gate to the front entrance, bushes in the open compound around and empty fountain with a statue of Krishna, long stone step-tiers rising up to Baba's private elevated gardens, where devotees could sit in peace, and a large Banyan tree in the center of the compound where people gathered for the large *darshans*. Around it was a circular concrete floor, and fifteen feet up its trunk was an umbrella of corrugated aluminium that extended out a twenty-foot radius, sheltering those under it from sun and rain.

The minute I left my bags with the Gurkha guard at the gate, Sai Baba was out for morning *darshan*. In fact he had already been by the Banyan tree, and was heading back via the school. It was Thursday, guru day, and they had just finished *bhajans*. As he was inspecting a wing of the academy, Baba saw me squatting playfully behind a hedge. I was testing him, humorously.

His rasping voice joked with the few who closely followed him. The rest of the crowd stood back forty feet. "Come, Rowdie." I felt a trifle embarrassed as I stood up in sudden plain view, walking out into the open sunlight where he stood.

As hundreds looked on, he grabbed my shirt sleeve, and said in my ear, "Tell the other Americans that tomorrow there will be a private dinner and school-day festival. Krishna play, singing, and speeches. You are invited, sir." Before I ran off in exuberance, Baba tugged my sleeve again. "Invite fat man with glasses . . . and . . . ." He went on to name or describe everybody except Kerry and Janet.

Later that afternoon, a pensive Kerry and Janet told me that for the past two weeks Baba hadn't been paying them much attention. He had held morning interviews with Jai, Michelle, Herman, and a small middle-aged group from California, who had flown in for several weeks, but no one else from our group had been included. I told them to persist, and that the tides would change.

By the next afternoon, the tides hadn't changed. They came to Baba's house along with the rest. But I wondered if it hadn't somehow been a bad gamble to encourage their coming.

As the American contingent crammed against one wall of Baba's coveted living room, a group of select Indians filled up the rest of our branch. Then in the other wing, at Baba's feet in front of a table heaped with large silver plates of food, was a protesting and embarrassed Maharajah, and his family sitting against the wall on stuffed silk cushions. The man would apologize everytime Baba motioned them to eat, and indicated in so many gestures, that he would feel much better if allowed to crawl off and join us rather than sit like a stuffed plum before Baba. Now and then, Baba would turn and give us a confidential wink.

A band started playing outside Baba's front door. Immediately the room emptied behind Baba, who led the procession down the inner driveway, sandwiched in between the two lines of kids in band uniforms. Out into the throngs we went, the Maharajah behind Baba, the middle-aged Americans, some Indians, and at the end of the trail, straggling along, a motley crew of tall, stringy haired Americans wearing assorted Indian outfits. By the time we reached the outdoor stage, the group went in different directions.

Expecting a banquet table with Baba at the head, we were ushered through the house into the rear garden where sat rows and rows of Baba's special local Mysore devotees, at least three hundred of them. I sat next to Anthony, who had just moved into the house with Jai, Michelle and me after he and Victoria had spent several weeks touring Mysore with Baba's special secretary, Sri

Kasturi. Like most Indian dinners, we ate in silence, cross-legged in a line of men, sitting on a jute mat, across from another line, and then another, etc. . . . Then the women's section started.

Still we were happy to eat what to us was now very good food, after eating fourth-rate, peasant class, vegetarian food for the last few months. While the Gurkha guard shooed away packs of monkeys, Anthony or I would motion, and one of the servants with a large bowl of rice, *sambhar*, *dal*, vegetable curry, *dahi*, or *bhaji*, would come along and scoop it out on our banana leaves. We ate with our hands. While I was trying to clear the last remnants off my leaf with a chapati, Baba appeared by my side. "You like it, Rowdie?" "Oh yes, Baba," I replied, looking up and making a circle with my fingers, like a French *chef*, "very good food."

"It's *Satwic* food, pure food . . . the cooks in the kitchen cook each rice saying mantra . . . 'Sai Ram, Sai Ram'. . . it is blessed by god, it is my *prasad* to you."

Anthony and I raised our hands in the traditional *namaste*, gesture of respect, and Baba left us saying "very happy, very happy." Out the rear door we went, receiving a cup of ice-cream on the way, as we headed for the rear tap to wash our hands. Then on home we went, in the pitch-black for a half a mile or so, down dirt-paths, by herds of swine, over outdoor drainage canals, into the primitive village of Kadugodi, where Jai and Michelle rented the hut.

Though my arrival into the school festival started things with a bang, things soon cooled off right after that. From March twentieth until late April, we went to the daily *darshans*, heard a few words from Baba, and then went home till the afternoon *darshan*. Our days became like clockwork, as we relished each word spoken by Baba and every little intuition, dream, or psychic experience that one of us would have.

Meanwhile the days lumbered by at our little house as we arose at five (the guys sleeping in the walled-in stone courtyard and the girls in a room inside), fixed tea, meditated, dressed, and by eight-thirty, headed towards the ashram. The hut was without a stick of furniture, so the cooking was done by kerosene-stove on the floor, as was eating, sleeping, and sitting. Water was hauled up out of the local village well down the path, and kept in a large earthenware storage bin outside in the courtyard. Some of it was used for cooking, some for bathing—the old rusty tin-can routine and some for cleaning our toilet, a cement hole in the floor of the courtyard stall. For those of us sleeping outside, the courtyard latrine didn't really matter because the rest of the neighbourhood smelt so bad by that we really couldn't tell the difference.

As we entered the Bangalore summer in April, the tin-can routine no longer worked. So we stopped for a cold shower on the way to *darshan* by the railway depot, and on the way back, going home. Even this didn't prevent sunstroke. Vickie had it on and off for weeks at a time, and I almost got it. Walking that half mile became a painful chore. We would cover our heads with white rags, and dance in and out of the shade to avoid burning rays of the sun.

Nor was my body adapting to vegetarian diet very well. I felt hard put to do almost anything physically. My supply of canned cheese and peanut butter, which I got at the American Embassy commissary, was running out. And to subsist on the food that we cooked for ourselves was no pleasant thought. It was all bruised, tiny, insect-wasted vegetables that had been irrigated with open sewage water, which Anthony and I bought in the hot, dust-swept village-market, where people missing eyes and hands crouched in the dust, and haggled over stacks of stuff on burlap rags dirtier than the garbage cans of New York City. And after we boiled the devil out of these things, to kill anything from amoebas to tapeworm eggs, there was nothing left but tasteless mush.

Kerry and Janet, renting a decrepit room in the row of rooms across from the Anglo-Indian woman, had solved their food problem by hiring a man servant to do the cooking.

Understandably, our one big relief from the squalor of Kadugodi was the hour-long bus ride into Bangalore, the famed progressive capital of unlittered streets, wide roads, and modern store-fronts. Along Brigade or Mahatma Gandhi roads, there were all sorts of Indo-European restaurants. Our favourite was a snack-bar called Nilgiri Dairy, a modern inexpensive milk-bar where the educated middle-class and the college set hung out.

What inevitably followed our Bangalore trips was an ensuing interest in book-stalls, and shop-windows, like the proverbial line of crumbs before a chicken. And this was sin, or ignorance (the Hindu synonym for sin). We were flirting with propensities that we should be trying to erase forever, not fostering. We would not go beyond the limits of ego until then. It usually took about a second in the *darshan*-line on the driveway for Baba to look into our eyes and know where we had just been. "Enjoying tourist trips? To much sweets is not good."

Gill was the only one who roughed it through all the way, hanging on with the will power that would pale a lobster. He almost never went into town, except over visa matters. He lived alone in a cabin, several miles down the main road from Brindavan towards Whitefield. Which was four miles in the fierce sun to and from Brindavan. After walking for a week, Gill rented a bike. The cabin itself was down a long winding-path on what was once an English farm, but was now as bleak as something out of *The House of Seven Gables*, belonging to an old Anglo-Indian woman named Mrs Blake. When Gill wasn't at *darshan*, he was meditating, all hours of day or night. Since no one cooked his food, he didn't trust "restaurants," and didn't want to bother himself, his diet was restricted to fruits and melons that he bought along the road on the way to and from Brindavan.

Even if the heat made me delirious, and close to nausea, after walking less than a mile, still Gill's ghostly form in head-dress and wrap around could be seen shuddering in the distant heat waves far off down the main road, as he walked in sandals on the scorhing tar, eating a mango or a papaya. Late March and early April was one of the hottest times, even for the elevated Bangalore district. Soon, though, would come the monsoon rains, and we could barely wait for them to hit, cooling everything down to the serventies and eighties, filling Brindavan with aromatic smells, and washing the ground.

On April twentieth, Baba called a halt to our obvious agony. In one of the few interviews we had *en masse* so far, he spilled the beans on what happened the previous night to Benno, who couldn't even open his mouth to tell us. As Baba told the story in detail, Benno's eyes opened in amazement. Referring to the fact that India, Marsha, Hans, and Benno (who had arrived at *Prasanthi Nilayam* at the tail end of Mahasivaratri) had spent the last few weeks sleeping under one of the large trees on the main road outside Brindavan, Baba said, "Not a good idea . . . too many dangers, thieves, beggars. . . sometimes rain coming down. No place to leave luggage, no privacy, not good." Indicating his pleasure in the spirit of their persistence, and self-denial, Baba nodded his head with pride and commented, "Not even my Indian devotees take such chances, put up with hardships, they are too attached. And you come from much higher standard of living."

Looking at the group, Baba went on, "Last night he loses some money. All that he had, ninety-three rupees." Benno shook his head in amazement. "At three a.m., thief puts hand in money purse, and quietly takes. Then he wakes up and looks around, but it is too late." Baba went on to tell the details of the story. At the end, he had Benno as a permanent disciple. "Don't worry, I will get you your ninety-three rupees. Whatever is mine is yours, your property. . . this house, this gardens, anything." And Baba looked to all of us and continued, "You have personal needs, just ask, that is why I am here. Don't be afraid, you need money? Ask."

"Now too many foreigners; foreigner means fore-near . . . near and dear. Now, is school closing, you come and stay here at Brindavan." Baba looked down at me and said, "Living in Kadugodi dirty, noises, smells, not good for meditation. Now I will open two large school rooms, there you stay. Males in one room, females in the other. Now seventeen Americans, too many people. After interview, get all your belongings and come here tonight."

After a month and a half of dry spell, suddenly we got more grace than we dreamed of. "We," meaning the group. Both Gill and I had already had two devastating interviews. One, a private one, was so devastating that I didn't talk to anyone about it. I just knew with a quiet assurance that with Baba I was more or less equivalent to a first century disciple of Christ. Gill wasn't around for that private one—I was in line after him, and the last one left, and the only one totally alone with Baba. Some of the new arrivals had been around for the main interview before the private ones, but most of them had to leave after that.

At the following interview only four people went in to see Baba, Gill, myself, a Ceylonese father, and his polio-stricken daughter. It was fraught with materializations and other paranormal displays of power. Among other things, Baba promised Gill freedom would come. He also looked down at me sitting by his side, as was invariably the rule, and promised visas to stay in India indefinitely as well a shints of my being in his world mission. As for the daughter, well, he knew her history of polio to the last dot. Baba reminded the father of some dreams in which he had appeared and instructed him. The Ceylonese almost fainted at that. Baba went on to assure that he would definitely cure the daughter's polio. That particular interview was a week back, and still Gill and I were no closer than we had been in Puttaparthi.

I could now feel my own annoyance at Gill mount as he moaned at the mention of having to move in with the group. Somehow it was beneath him. He protested several times, and Baba had to finally tell him sternly enough that it was his will that Gill move in.

Baba whispered something sweetly in his ear, and Gill muttered an obscenity. I wanted to smash him so hard in his face that he'd never be able to move his mouth again. Baba apparently didn't hear the comment, or allowed it to go by him through sheer divine mercy, I wasn't sure though. Later I found out, since the only one Gill confided anything to was Anthony, that apparently the night before he had had another frightening fight while disembodied with a demon from the void, and that it almost killed him. He was scared and wanted to know when it would end. Baba uttered, according to Gill, a pat meaningless phrase in his ear.

The air crackled in silent hostility towards Gill as the group began to wonder if he was anything more than a large spoiled baby putting on some kind of a tremondous show. The others, like me, were ignorant of his astral heroics with the demon.

Baba proceeded on with the interview for half hour more, at times asking me to reword his teachings. "Always keep the name of god in mind, that is *mantram*, Om Sri Ram. . . like this it is like a life-boat to cross the ocean of *samsara*. When physical death comes, and the name of god is on your tongue . . . *bas*, no more rebirth. Whatever is the last thought at the moment of death . . . that is what you are. Explain, Rowdie." Physically shaking from sitting beside Baba's chair, where a constant power flowed out, I said, "Well, we've talked about this before (referring to our many group sessions). Like it says in the *Bardo Thodol*, the last thought impression in your mind at the point of death will heavily influence your next incarnation. If it is of god, which is only possible after a life of rigorous mental training, you reach *samadhi* . . . according to Baba it's not all that simple. If you register fear or anger, then the death experience itself will be terrifying, and your chances next time around will be no better or worse."

Baba twinkled and slapped me on the back, "Very good." For ten minutes more he talked about the divine reaching out for man, and man, the *jiva*, reaching up for god, at a certain level in his spiritual evolution. He likened it to a stalagmite and a stalactite in a cave growing to meet one another in the middle to form a column.

"I'll show you." The air began to hum. Baba leaned forward with his sleeve rolled up, and spun his open palm around in giant circles. There was a huge flash of power. All seventeen of us in the room rocked, as Baba's hand began to quiver like a tuning fork. Then as something flickered into visibility in the palm of his hand, he closed it to catch it. He opened his hand, holding a large smooth stone about an inch and a half long. He passed it to about three people to look at. Then Baba asked for it again, held it up to his mouth, all the time holding it between his thumb and the forefinger, then blew on it, and turned it around for all of us to see. There was a large hole where he had blown. As Baba passed it around, he explained that the two cones almost touching in the hole, was like his relationship to us.

Baba gave the stone to Gill, who accepted it in apologetic gratitude. As the interview ended, Baba materialized a large lump of "Mysore Pack," a type of Indian fudge, and handed it out. Then he brought in a box of mangoes, and gave one to each of us. As we left, group spirit reached its all-time peak, as people scattered in different directions to pack and move in as quickly as possible, almost reminiscent of the joy of the early Christians.

This marked the beginning of a brief "honeymoon with god" as the lot of us whistled, sang, and danced like the dwarfs in Snow White, while moving into the two large classrooms. Mats were rolled out, mosquito nets pitched, chairs moved aside, as the brand-new classroom was made a modern dormitory for yogis. On the stage in the men's room, flowers were arranged, incense burned, and large pictures of gods and gurus went up, from Shankaracharya, Ramakrishna, Chaitanya, Sri Rama, to Laxmi, rendering the entire stage a sort of giant-sized puja table. Center-stage, garlanded with flowers, was a framed photo-portait of Baba.

For the next two weeks, we felt the full force of undeserved grace as we went up to Baba's house almost every day to have a group interview. This was a total of over ten interviews, averaging two hours a piece, an unprecedented rate for anyone considering that this well surpassed the average quota of interviews per lifetime of even the closer devotees. Afraid of our squandering such a gift, I got into the habit of recording key points as I sat next to Baba's chair. Later I would type them up, and hand out several copies.

Now that the faucet was on again, after a month's dry spell starting right after the school festival of March twenty-third, the days soared by. Baba, all of a sudden, squandered more attention on us each day than he had the entire previous month. Accentuating this was the recent quiet within Brindavan in the evening, early morning, and off-hours, when the public was absent. This was mainly because the compound was locked up with the mid-April school holidays in effect, which left only us, Baba, Baba's staff, and the Gurkha guard. We were beginning to feel as though we owned the place, especially since we had been given free reign over the entire grounds, except for Baba's house inside.

We arose each morning at four-thirty or five, washed under the cold taps in the public lavatories, meditated on the porch or around the huge empty tank that resembled a Roman bath. By seven we cooked breakfast, a porridge, called *soojie*, and tea, in a bare crusty room next to the Gurkha guard's quarters. And by nine most of the ladies were out waiting on the women's side of the driveway for morning *darshan*. Unless it was Thursday, then all of us sat under the Banyan tree enclosure, where the crowd sang *bhajans* to Baba as he either walked or sat before us. Otherwise, everyday but "Guru Thursday," some of us in the male section lingered behind for Baba's room inspection, depending upon whether we suffered stage-fright with Baba. The usual three of us who weren't so blown out by his private appearance as to be incommunicado were Anthony, Gill, myself, and more and more, a new fellow named Bruce. Baba would often spend fifteen or twenty minutes with us, revealing facts about the various "holy personages" on our puja table, or telling puns and jokes, stabbing us in the belly with a finger, or, when we weren't stationed at the door like West Point cadets, he might tiptoe in to catch us off guard. If Gill was meditating, then Baba might tweak his ear making him jump about a foot every time. When Gill turned an enraged face to discover the embodiment and focal point of his meditations, his face would soften into an "Oh, it's you." As this exclusive clowning went on, the crowd forty yards away, would stand motionless, all eyes and ears. After darshan, when the crowd dispersed, you'd think we had the secrets of the universe, the way people followed us around, and peeped into our dorm.

At four, everybody went out to the main compound for *darshan*, which could last until seven, since Baba never had any specific hour that he emerged. He would slowly go up and down the drive, crossing back and forth from the men's side to the women's, blessing people, commenting on, and revealing things they did, giving advice, or his other method of teaching—ignoring them. If he hadn't told us "interview today" while we sat in the long row of *bhaktas* or brought me aside and whispered directions, he would signal us at the last moment as he went back through the gate towards his house, "Come! Why do you sit? You do not want interview today?"

On 7 May 1970, Baba gave us our tenth interview within two weeks to "recharge batteries" since he was going to Bombay for "a few days." 7 May was an auspicious day. And for us to be with the world saviour on such a significant day, was a titanic omen. He hadn't called in the rishis, or the pundits of India, but the Americans camping out in the school building.

"The position of the earth, the orbit of the sun, the stars in the heavens now converging for the first time in many thousands of years. Some seven thousand years. Today is 7th May 1970. Today is the day of the seven rishis, the seven oceans, the seven planes, the seven rays of light." And Baba quickly named many groups of sevens. "Seven is a very lucky number. Eight is a bad number, the number of *maya*, delusion, desires, evils . Nine is the number of god, *brahman* . . . the perfect number."

"See, one of the seven sages is Narda. Well, there is a story. One day Narayana, embodiment of the God Vishnu"—the girls oohed and twinkled at Baba—"was walking up the mountain back to his kingdom, *Vaikuntha*, where his father resided as the omnipresent god, without form. He was in a happy mood because his hunting conquered the rakshasas"—Baba winked, and everybody understood that he was joking when he said god was in a happy mood, since god was eternally in a state of bliss state beyond moods—"On the way up the mountain, Narayana, passes a yogi with a very impatient spoiled look, like Mr Freedom," Baba chuckled motioning to Gill, who rolled his head. "The yogi asks Narayana, 'Oh please tell me when I can enter your kingdom, when will I find the secret password, and be rid of all past *karmas*? Tell me when.' Narayana, says, 'you see the number of leaves on that bush, that many more lifetimes as a *sadhaka*, then you can come.' " Baba imitated the disgruntled expression of the yogi, who obviously underestimated the momentous boon of eternal enlightenment. " 'Oh, that's too long, I want it now,' Narayana says, 'Count yourself lucky, even that is with god's grace.' So Narayana walks on, and then sees Narda further up the mountain, sitting before a bush with twice as many leaves as the other bush. Narda asks the same question and Narayana gives him the same reply, so he says smiling, 'Oh thank you Lord, the number of lifetimes is so small, I can count them as leaves on a bush.' When Narayana sees his gratitude, his heart is touched with divine grace. 'Since you are so gracious, you can pull all the leaves off the bush now, and accompany me to my father's kingdom.' That is the difference between the law of *karma* and god's special grace."

For quite a while, Baba had been elucidating various yogic techniques, "concentrate on one of the forms of god . . . . Draw in your mind again and again. After a while you will become that form. Sometimes you will open your eyes and see my body, or Rama. Then with proper sense control, you can go from form into the formless. God is everywhere. Sometimes Ramakrishna became a goddess, he dressed like a woman, talked like a woman, no one could tell it was a man. He saw his face in the mirror and he saw Kali. This was the bliss state of *bhava samadhi*. But to reach the formless eternal bliss, Ramakrishna had to break the form forever one day by meditating on a small piece of glass.

"For meditation without form, use a flame. *Jyoti* is light, symbol of god. Imagine the flame in the middle of the brow . . . what's the name of this, Rowdie?" Baba asked with a laugh, bending down over the side of his chair to look at me.

"Oh, that's the *Ajna Chakra*, Baba, the sixth *chakra*, next to the last one. Some yogic experiences from this Baba." I was half-joking with him since a few weeks back, when Gill and I had an interview with the Ceylonese father and his polio-stricken daughter, we went through the same routine until the end, he reached down and pinched me in the region of the third eye, which gave me a near-mystical feeling of elated intoxication for well over five hours. It was certainly as powerful as some of my earlier LSD trips, though nowhere the last one.

Baba playfully tapped my third eye again, and went on, this time not blasting my head off. "Now imagine the light entering the cave of the heart—the heart region is called *hrydayam* and illuminating within. Let this light destroy all hate, anger, ego, jealousy, and let it fill the body. When the body is full of light, slowly let it out wider and wider, in circles. Let it first fill the room, then the house, until it embraces the whole mankind. Do this, and there will be very quick spiritual progress."

"Look like this. Keep the head straight, from the base of the spine up." Baba reached down, and positioned me in the meditative posture, which in fact was quite an effort to hold. "Then when purification comes, the energy, called *Kundalini shakti*, can pass from the base of the spine up. Then one day, it will pass all the way up and *bas* . . . enlightenment, the play is over," Baba concluded wistfully.

Most of us who had studied either Hatha yoga or read Vivekananda's Raja yoga, new about Ayurvedic physiology, concerning the neuro-endocrine power centers and their corresponding activity paralleling changes in consciousness. That with sense control and increasing neurological purification, through all types of abstinence and god-centered thoughts, the body was being conditioned for full current, *samadi*. With all the power centers lined up like rings, and the center pathway, known as the *sushumna*, opened up, the thousand petalled lotus chakra finally opened at the very top of the head. This we theorized was the golden halo and the source of power miracles. Ramakrishna once told his disciples, Baba reported to us, that if they experienced in their bodies one hundredth the power that surged through him in a fraction of a second, they would die.

"Special grace," Baba announced. As we concentrated on his bare forearm whirling around, we felt a surge of energy as his palm closed. When he opened his hand, there were five rings neatly braided with about seven elements of metal apiece. He handed them out to everybody except India.

Baba looked over to the male half of the room, "Envy?" A few heads bowed in embarrassment. "Don't worry, special grace is never exhausted, it is like an ocean."

Baba's hand began whirling again in huge arcs, right in front of Gill's face. Another surge rippled through the room, only this time Baba's hand was holding something so large that it glinted through his spread-out fingers. Breaths drew in with a spasm as Baba opened, like a deck of cards, eleven large oval metal plates with a photographic likeness of himself enamelled on each of them, in colour. "This is a microphone from you to me. It will help in meditation, and if you are away in America or across the world, shout 'Sai Ram,' and I will come to your aid. This is only for very special *sadhakas* and devotees."

Baba left to get a box of mangoes as everybody shifted around in frenetic glee. "These are the best in India. From Maharashtra near Bombay, a special devotee gives them to Swami every year—limited number available only to the very wealthy, the rest flown abroad in refrigerated cargo plane." He threw them out to some people, looking one way, and tossing them another. Others he held in his hand and banged people on the head before handing them out.

Before the group ran out, Baba stood at the door to teach us a Vedic prayer. It was for us to recite before eating. It took all that we had to get our concentration back to the point of remembering what to us were nonsense syllables, until Baba translated them.

In the same sweet yearning refrains, Baba sang into the night air of Brindavan, just as he did before the thousands at the Mahasivaratri festival, using different words,

> *Asatho maa sad gamaya* . . . (from untruth lead me to truth) *Thamaso maa jyotir gamaya* (from darkness led me to light) *Mrythyor maa amritham gamaya* (From death, lead me to immortality).

An hour later, at about ten p.m., some of Baba's servants came into the men's room with five or six large straw baskets. "Baba gives *prasad*, food, to eat while he is away." For the next hour or so, we ran around trying to rig up various pulleys and contraptions so that the bags would hang from the ceiling where the rats and mice would not be able to get them. It was the biggest assortment of fruit and vegetables that any of us had seen yet in India, enough to last us a week.

Baba, as it turned out, left on the 9 May—nine being the number for God, we reflected—and the "few days," turned into a few weeks of absence. Almost the minute Baba's Fiat, driven by Raja Reddy, pulled out of the compound the tempo of things slowed down. I was amazed how dead things were in comparison, now that the faucet seemed off. Yet how could Baba's spirit in any way be localized, I pondered?

As many of us headed into Bangalore, sporadically, on protein binges, Jai always managed to make himself scarce as we got to Brigade Road. Jai, finally unburdened his heart, and revealed where he had been going, as it turned out, for some time now.

Almost yelling in the restaurant, Jai shared his confidences. "There's this fat guy on the otha parta town called Siva Bala Yogi, and he's a kundalini power yogi, who meditates all day long. Well, since its respekful to give homage to enlightened beings, I decided to go by and see him. Any way. . . ." The story went on like a CIA tape as both Michelle and I raised eyebrows, now comprehending why Baba had looked at Jai in the interview. I made my disdain for Siva Bala Yogi no secret.

As we took a motorscooter-rickshaw to his temple I went on to Jai, "You've gotta be the most myopic fool in the universe. Seriously, you go after meditative zap-outs, as though it was the end thing, like an eel sucking on a broken power cable. And you've got the brain of an ant when it comes to discerning the relative values of all these things." Jai had just informed me that one of Bala Yogi's miracles was to sit in *samadhi*, and generate such mind-warping power that he could say nothing, and within five minutes have a garden of three hunded people dancing around and babbling, some hanging on branches like "Hanuman." When we heard that Bala Yogi was on tour, that ended our inquiry, and I almost dismissed the subject, except when Jai would amble over, now and then, and tell me more facts and details about him.

Meanwhile the two weeks of Baba's absence went by fairly uneventfully. The only hassle with Gill occurred at four-thirty a.m. in the men's dorm. Gill, who almost used to howl if a fly made too much noise, finally began raving at Jai doing his most complex and elaborate power-breathing—a seven stage affair that sounded like a choo-choo train—taught to him by Hilda Charlton who, in turn, learned it from some avadhut super-yogi when she was in India. Jai finally moved out on the porch, but could still be heard a block away. Meanwhile, I was looking for Gill to slip, so that I could jump on him. I knew that what he was not right, but it was doing was not yet wrong enough.

By the time Baba's car had returned on 20th May we were ecstatic. In the morning from eight to five, filling the air with wailing trombones, tubas, cymbals, flutes, and fluttering drums as boys in the band, the same squad that marched the procession down Baba's drive on the school-day festival, had rehearsals that drove us nearly hystesical at times. The more ambitious they became the more hideous a cacophony filled the air, as they progressed from Sousa Marine corps marches to Mid-West high school football rah-rahs, fox trots, and romance songs from "The King and I" to "The Stars Fell on Alabama." In fact it was so high-camp that none of us could believe that it wasn't a practical joke. Hence added incentive, while Baba was away, to ride into Bangalore.

Now that Baba was back, the band tried even harder, creating impossible flute solos that fluttered in the air, then fell with a gronk. Ultimately the scenario was perfect for a confrontation between Gill and me. At ten one morning, while I was writing, Gill yelled something in the air about the way I cleared my throat (I was plagued with recurring tonsil trouble). The room cleared, and five minutes later, there was a "roar out" between us that could be heard a block away. At first I let him blow it with a rapid fire dialogue, fit for the Santa Barbara "Angels." I didn't say much, just stared at him with a cinder-block gaze. Then, still holding my cool, I told him that the very fact that he could blaspheme betrayed that beneath his usual look of austere reverence was a fundamental twist in personality that indicated that he had lost sight of the true path light-years back—that he was playing games with himself, and copping out of the responsibility to love by going through all kinds of yogic heroics—better he should start anew and learn humility, love, and self-control. He started yelling again, and finally I snapped. There was a stand off, eyes glaring, nose to nose, and I swore in my mind that if I saw his arm move, I'd blast him so hard in the center of face, he wouldn't know what hit him. After another minute of twitching deadly silence, shotgun mountain Gill snorted, turned around, got under his mosquito net, and continued meditating as though nothing had happened. I took a three-hour walk, immediately coming face to face with the girls scampering around the kitchen area, pale-faced, talking in whispers, and looking like hens that just had their heads cut off. They seemed to sympathize with me the most, knowing that I was usually the cheerful peacemaker. I told them that somebody had to keep Gill in line, knowing that his sensitive system had gotten a dose of aggression that he hadn't seen for a long time, and that it would be simpler for him not to insist on living by the gun.

The next day after his return, Baba came by for room inspection and informed me that we should all go up to the house after *darshan* to hear about his tour. Baba's story was so impressive that we wondered what he was doing even spending a minute of his time with us. After giving us a photograph album given him by the press, he flipped through the pages and recounted the main events. He also gave us a large stack of glossy photos, some of them of himself before crowds of seventy thousand, like at the Bombay stadium, with rallies equally large as the Billy Graham tours. Instead of talking down to us, as practically anybody would with a reception like that, Baba amazed us even more by speaking with the unselfconscious joy of one family member to another, never allowing the conquests to get in the way.

After chartering a private plane to Jamnagar in Gujarat State, and being received at the palace of the Rajamata of Nawanagar with a full honour guard and police band, Baba proceeded on the next day Dwarka, the supposed birthplace of Krishna, where thousands awaited him at the famous Krishna temple. After blessing it, he drove back to Jamnagar with a huge motorcade, stopping on the sandy shore of Kuranga. As the crowd followed him, he collected shells, walked along the water's edge, and finally sat down.

"Krishna temple, too much peoples, very few have *darshan* of Krishna, so give special *darshan.*" With a crowd of many hundreds looking on, Baba described how he sat on a completely foreign beach, heaped up a cubit of sand, flattening it on top, and then drew a pattern on top; first a three slanted line, then a circle on top, a small triangle over that, and then a short line across the circle, symbolical of Krishna. After announcing, "It's ready," Baba stuck his hand in the mound, and pulled out a sparkling fifteen-inch solid gold statue of Krishna. To be sure, the picture of the miracle was in all the local papers, announcing that the idol was far too large for someone as tiny as Baba to smuggle, and the chances of finding something pre-planted on a beach he'd never been to in his life amidst a giant milling crowd was highly unlikely, especially the way he had moved so freely across the acres of faceless sand, to landmarks which weren't there in the first place. As they were about to leave, Baba asked the awe-filled chauffeur his favourite god-form. As he mentioned "Amba-Bhavan," Baba waved his hand, creating a gold plate with the picture of deity on it.

The second great event was a visit by Baba to one of the most hallowed grounds in India, the Somnath temple, established in 200 AD and, at one time, the richest temple in India. After many foreign invasions, the temple was rebuilt a number of times. The final building was started in 1947, and called Mahameru Prasad, the Hindu equivalent of Saint Peters in Rome or the Blue Mosque in Istanbul.

Before a titanic crowd, Baba mounted the inner sanctuary after being received by the temple trustees and high officers of the district and state. Then amid Karnatic temple horns, Baba went along a red carpet, opened the silver door, and proceeded along the festooned pathway lined with banana trees towards the main shrine of Someshwar.

As he entered the "holy of holies," while Brahmin pandits recited Vedic hymns, Baba directed that a silver tray be brought to him. He opened his empty palm, held it over the plate, and instantly materialized a stream of 108 silver bilva leaves, and then 108 gold flowers. In turn, Baba poured these upon the three-foot lingam of the temple, (inaugurated by the Indian president, Rajendra Prasad) to revitalize the "new" lingam; the original lingam, as mentioned in the *Skanda Purana*, existed thousands of years ago, an egg-sized object, as bright as the sun and self-originating. And, according to legend, was originally installed by Brahma himself and worshipped by the moon-god, as well as being the first of the twelve sacred lingas of light that every Hindu is expected to learn and recite.

Before some of the highest priesthood of the land, Baba waved his hand to fulfil his promise that before he left, he would restore the original "Sowrashtra Somanatha." Instantly there appeared a brilliant ball of light in Baba's hand. Baba claimed that he had brought it up from its ancient hiding place underground (as it was never to be seen), under the shrine of the present linga. Later the priests and trustees confirmed this fact regarding its legendary location. Then Baba created a solid silver stand, gave it to the chief priest, and announced, "Let it remain in the full light of day for pious eyes to worship. The avatar has come to remove all fear." Before leaving Baba unfurled the temple flag that towered over the central shrine, as the huge crowd shouted "Jai Bhagvan" ("Victory to God"—*Bhagvan* being the highest name . . . far above rishi, Mahatma, Avadhuta, Shankaracharya, Swami, Paramhamsa, etc., etc. . . . only given an avatar).

We left the *darshan* room in a dazed wonder, as I flipped through the photo-album Baba had given me. Later we got to pick and choose the glossy photos between us, feeling luckier every moment that we had sustained this casual relationship with Baba. While his countrymen were unaware of his unapproachable splendour.

A week or so later, within the first week of June, we were already beginning to feel the effects of growing prestige through our association with Baba. We had been special guests on 25 May, when Baba inaugurated a medium-sized iron foundry near Brindavan After we had sat in line with the beggars, at a public feeding, the owners of the foundry sought us out and invited us to a banquet at their home. Since then, a fairly prestigious Baba devotee and local Bangalore doctor, named Sundar Rao, after seeing where we lived, invited us to attend his son's wedding which would take place in Baba's private rear garden.

After exiting gracefully through the rear garden door, I loped the rest of the way home. One of Baba's messengers ran up to me, and I suddenly knew that I had been caught in the act of gluttony. Then the youth strained to pronounce an English word. It turned out to be a name, "Gill Locks." Baba wanted to speak to Gill Locks. Arming myself for another roar-out, I went up to Gill and informed him. The response was amusing incredulity, "Baba's never known my name, everything else, yes, but never my name." I defended Baba's "omniscience," yet all I could recall tangibly were Baba's descriptive reference to people, never names. With the older American devotees, yes, but I had never heard one of our names mentioned. A message soon followed saying that Baba wanted to see all of us the next afternoon.

Near the end of the interview, Baba briefly left the room and returned with a computerized card, and handed it to Gill who exclaimed, "Good God, Swami, you couldn't have done that . . . there's no way that thing could have gotten here by now. Why, I just mailed off my claim a few days ago. How the . . . ." Then Gill noticed that the card from the San Francisco branch of the Bank of America happened to have that day's date stamped on it, and there was no way that thing could have gotten from San Francisco to Bangalore City, south India, within an eight-hour stretch. Not even a private Phantom jet IF104 hijacked from the Strategic Air Command could clock that sort of time. In fact Gill's claim should just be arriving at the Central Bank, and then there is usually up to a week's computer back-up to go through, at least according to the Bangalore branch, who were unable to replace Gill's stolen traveller's cheques.

"Yeah Baba, how'd you get it through the computer so fast." Baba replied, "I have the whole world in the palm of my hand. Divine will, sir space and time are no obstacle to Swami."

After handing out more "juicy-sweet" mangoes, Baba broke the news that there would be no need for interviews as we were to start coming to his house for "private *bhajan*" when he had them. It wasn't possible, we knew, for devotees to get much more intimate with Baba, short of being actual house guests, and almost nobody had ever done that. Before we left, the girls had a surprise that they thought they would spring on Baba . . . "Swami? . . ."

"Oh, yes, very happy to come to dinner—you cook the meal." The girls managed to ask the time before Baba answered their question. "Any time, any time—whatever is convenient for you." After asking for his advice, Baba recommended within four days. Sure enough, the American bhaktas had another one-time notch on their record of firsts, cooking an Indian meal for Sai Baba, who at Puttaparthi, at least, wouldn't eat, unless, the food had been cooked by one of a handful of specially appointed people.

Baba, talking almost at half speed like a 78 rpm record played at 45, and speaking with a growl, was slowly putting together, or trying to recall, what I was sure was a slogan—something like, "If there is beauty in the character, there will be harmony in the home; when there is harmony in the home, there will be order in the nation. When there is order in the nation, there will be peace in the world," which was one of the sayings that he used fairly often. What came out was a mysterious word salad, in no kind of syntactical order, of which many of the actual words themselves were anagrams, and jumbles of transplanted syllables. Baba repeated it two more times, and perhaps sensing the lack of vigour in our response, finally abandoned it halfway through the third try. Eyeing each other nervously, we let that one blow over as a test.

Later Baba pointed out, while looking at Gill and me, who sat in the very center of the circle right in front of him, "Mutt and Jeff . . . the team captains . . . the lion and the tiger . . . like an angry couple," Baba threw a few more jibes our way, making me feel embarrassed, amused, and complimented. Then Baba went on to build us up in the eyes of the other, saying that we were basically two yogis, very sincere, and dedicated. About this time I felt the gaze of some of my compatriots becoming a little less friendly.

As Baba casually arose to leave, he dropped another bomb on us on his way out of the door. "The school principal will need classrooms. School holiday ends in a few days, then school starting. Where to put the Westerners?" As we stood with mouths dropping over the bad news, Baba answered his rhetorical question, "Kadugodi not a good idea for meditations, too much noise, too much dirt. I know," his eyes lighting up, "Starting tomorrow, all Americans move into my house."

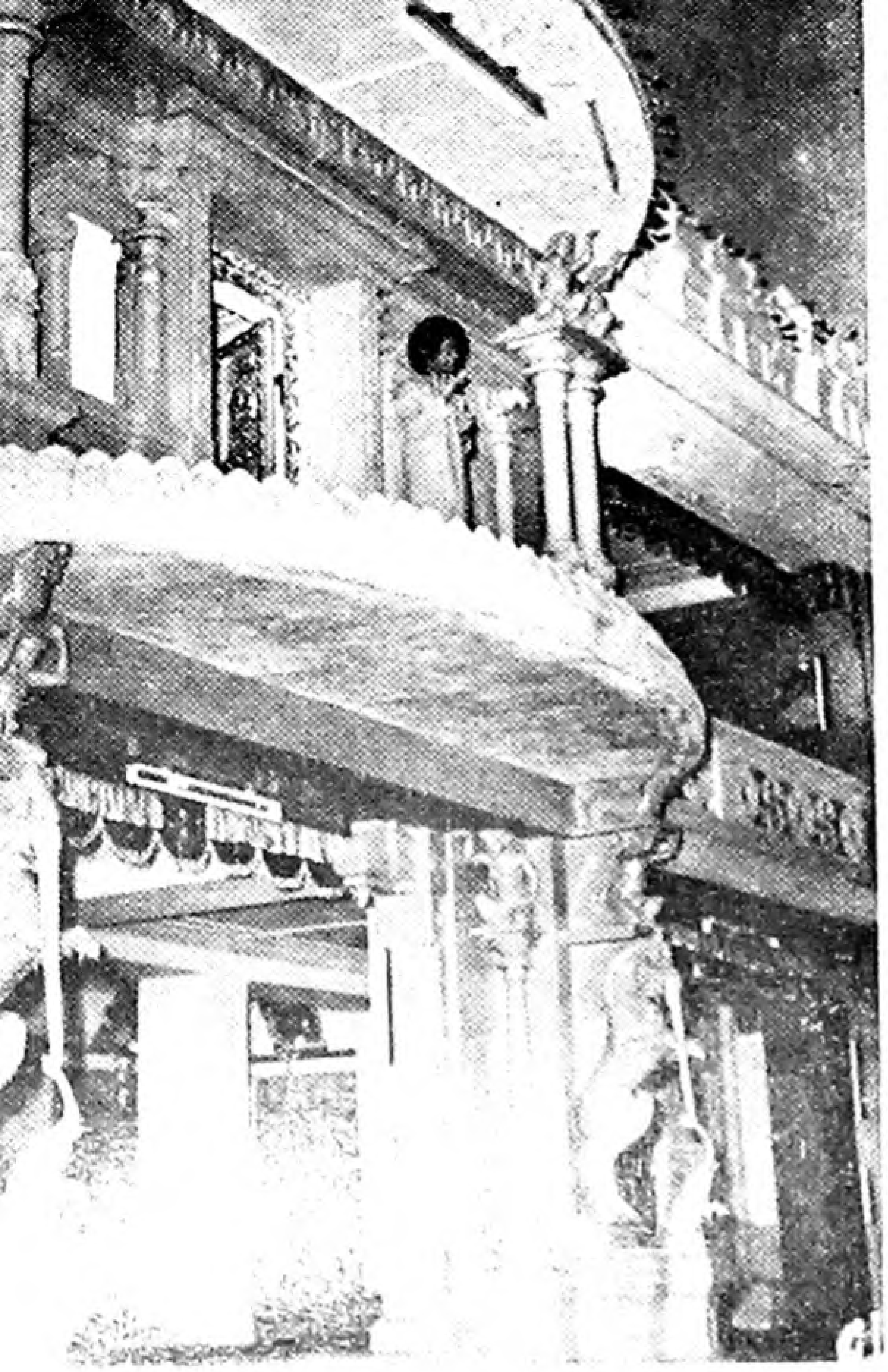
10

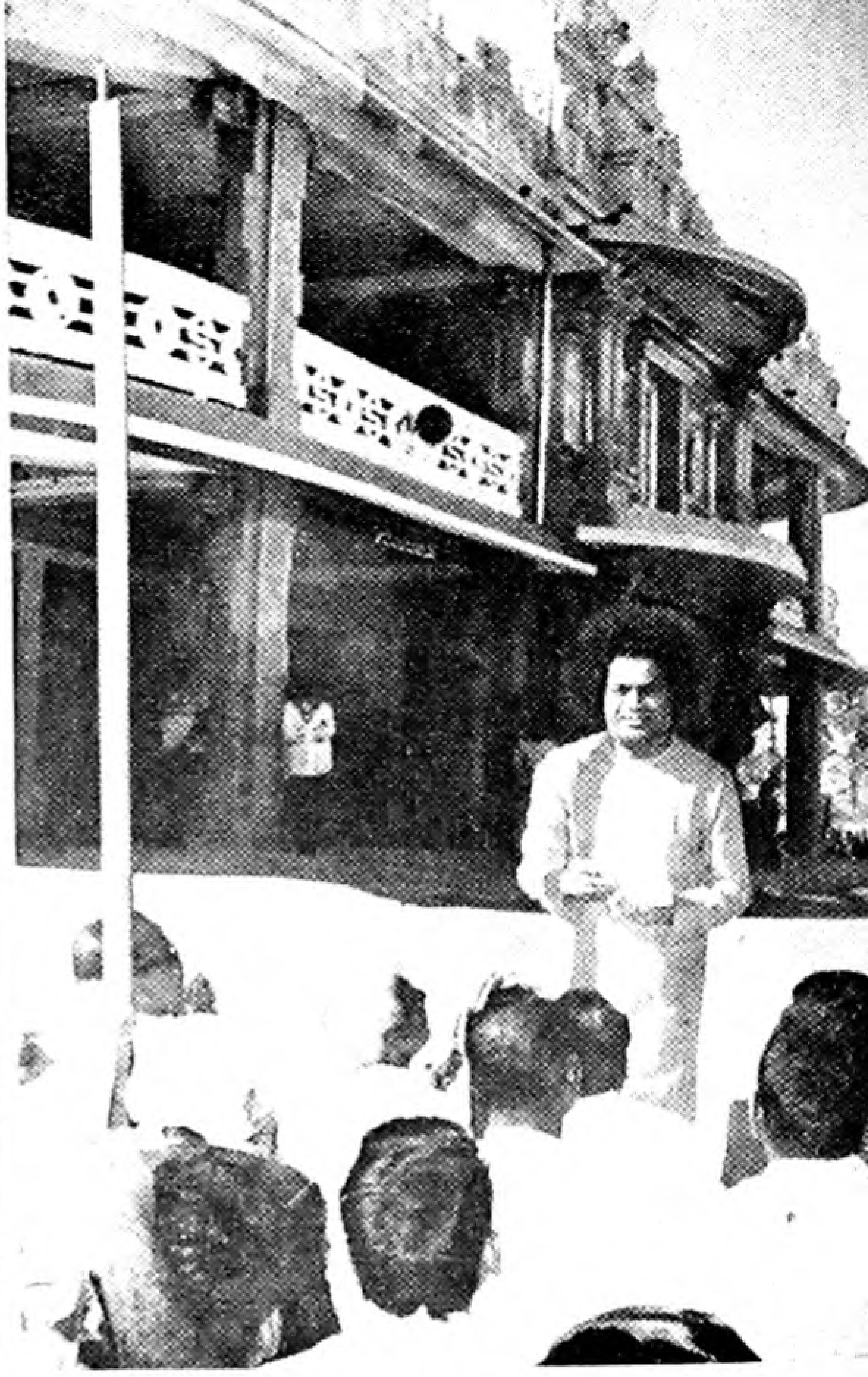
On approximately 12 June, we moved into Baba's private residence. After we had transported our luggage from the classrooms to the house, separated by several hundred feet of walkways, hedges, and walls, Baba gave us a quick house tour, showing us where to store our luggage. A stricter segregation of the sexes was enforced as the ladies were restricted to the *bhajan*-hall behind the kitchen, one room, a rear hallway, and the rear garden and porch, all towards the back of the house. Their storage-room bedroom was near the bedrooms of Baba's 86 year old mother, the Maharani of Sandur, a permanent guest, and her grand-daughter, Nanda, the Princess of Kutch. At night, the girls either spread their bedding on the back porch or on the floor of the *bhajan*-hall. A high stonewall, connecting to the house, closed off Baba's private rear garden.

From the rear porch, a stairway led to the roof, a wide open concrete look out with waist-high walls on the outside, and, on one corner, a bare empty shelter where old rugs were stored. On the front end of the roof sat Baba's self-contained quarters, utterly isolated from the rest of the house. It had its own porch, bathroom, living room, and ultra plush and sealed off bedroom. The entire

The new ornate stone facade on the prayer hall at Baba's ashram, Prasanthi Nilayam.

The Ananthapur College for Girls, where Tal first saw Baba, before the college was built, and where he last saw Baba.



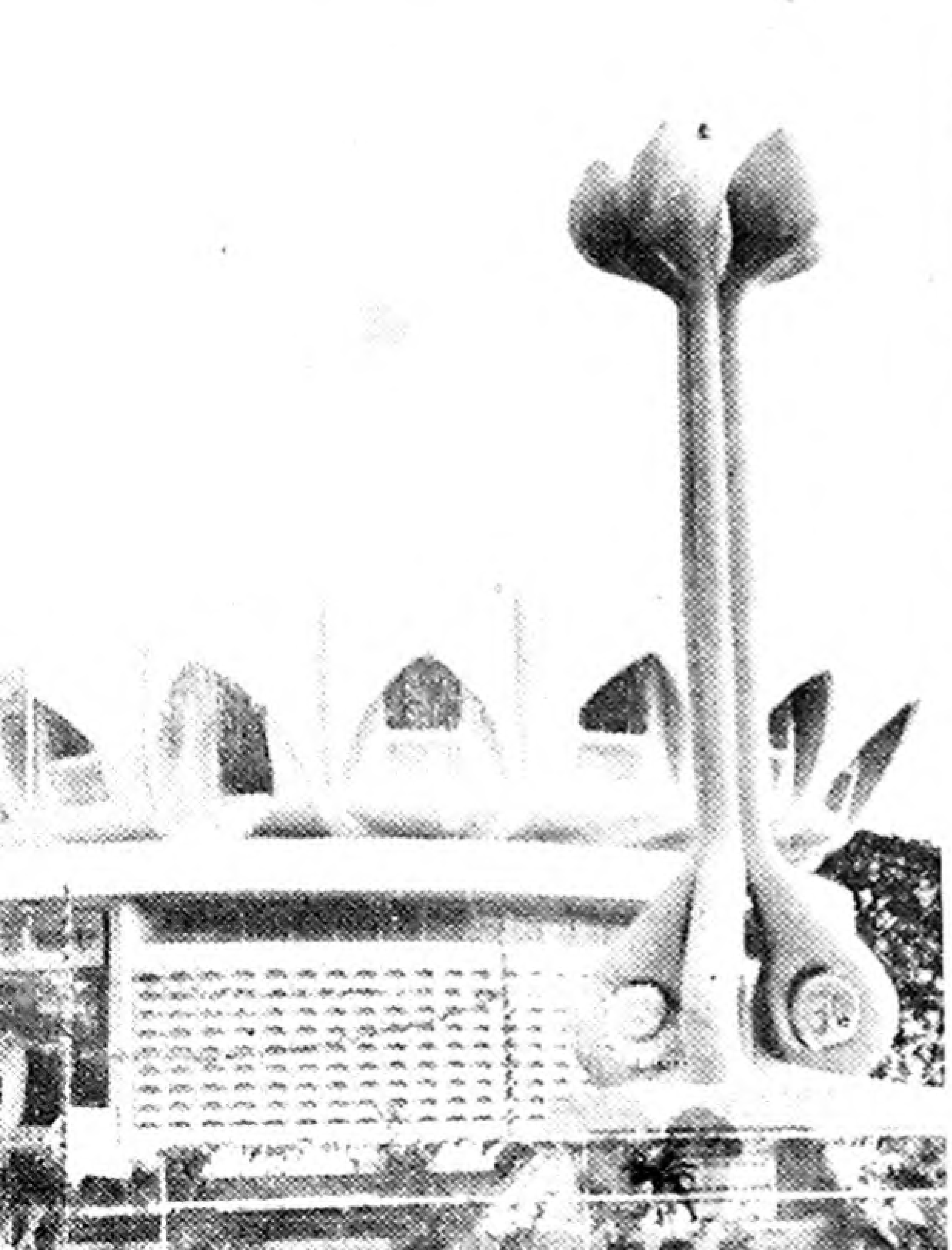


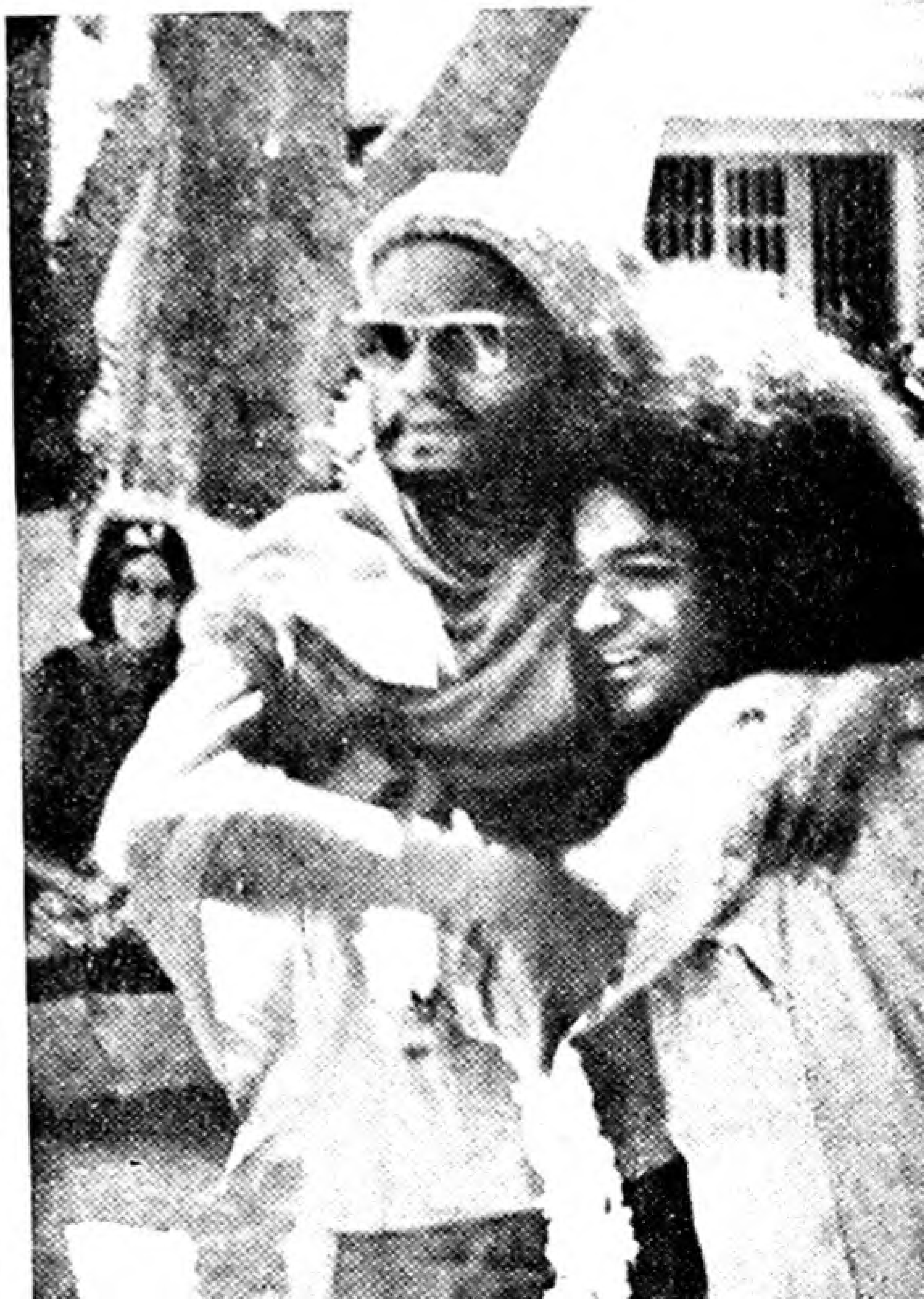
Baba giving darshan.

Baba out for afternoon darshan.

[illegible] residence "The Saucer."

Muktananda aggressively approach
***Baba** for a hug, as **Baba** heads ba*
to his Brindavanam residence.





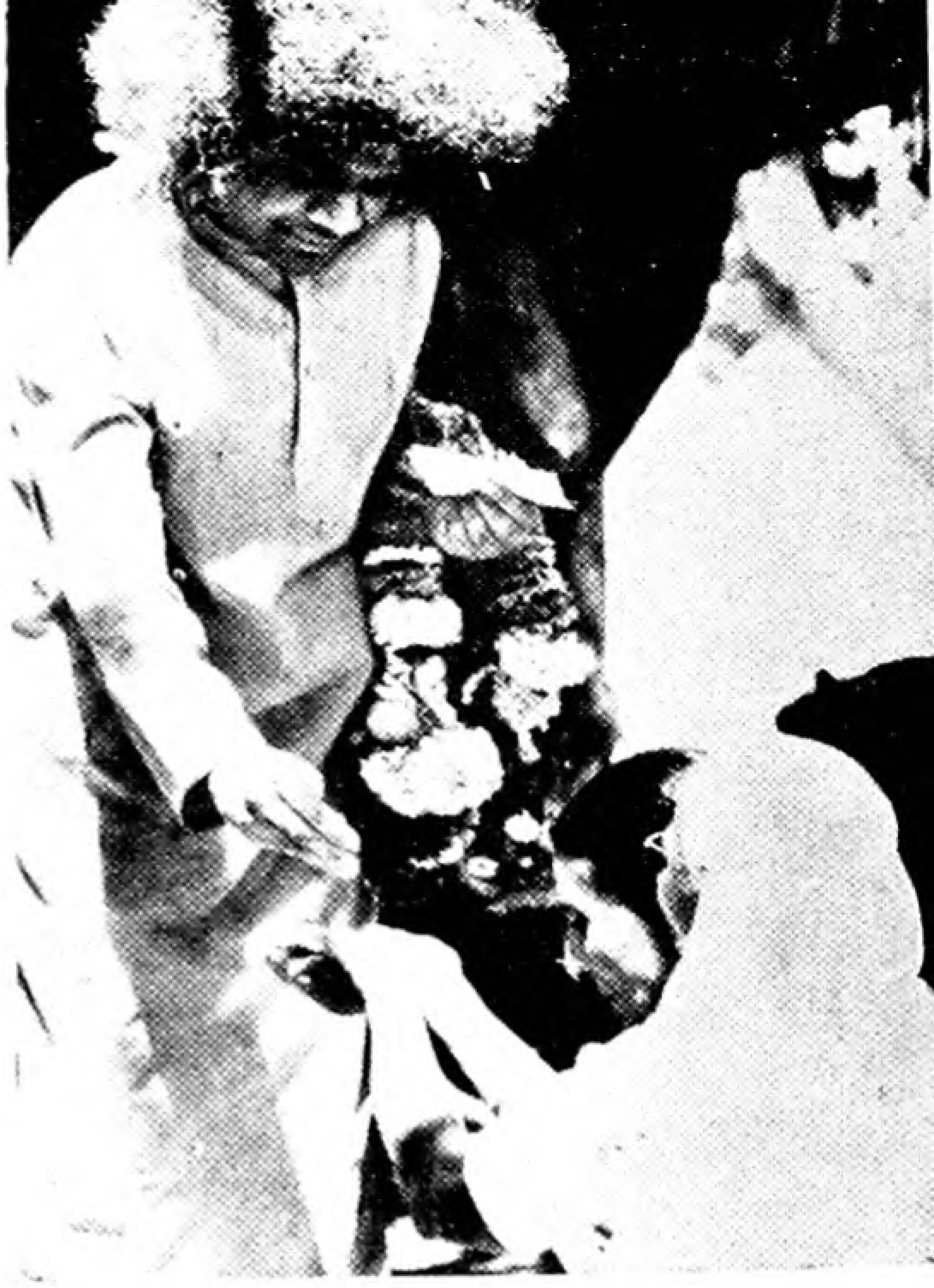
The Guru Purnima festival. Singing are Gill, Peter, Tal and Bruce.

Mrs Giri speaking at the inauguration of Sri Sathya Sai Arts and Science College for Women. From Right: *President Giri, Sai Baba and Brahmananda Reddy.*

IN THE DIVINE PRESENCE
OF
BHAGAVAN SRI SATHYA SAI BABA
PREMISES OF SRI SATHYA SAI ARTS AND SCIENCE COLLEGE FOR W

Towards the Sai Era of Education, with the President of India and others.

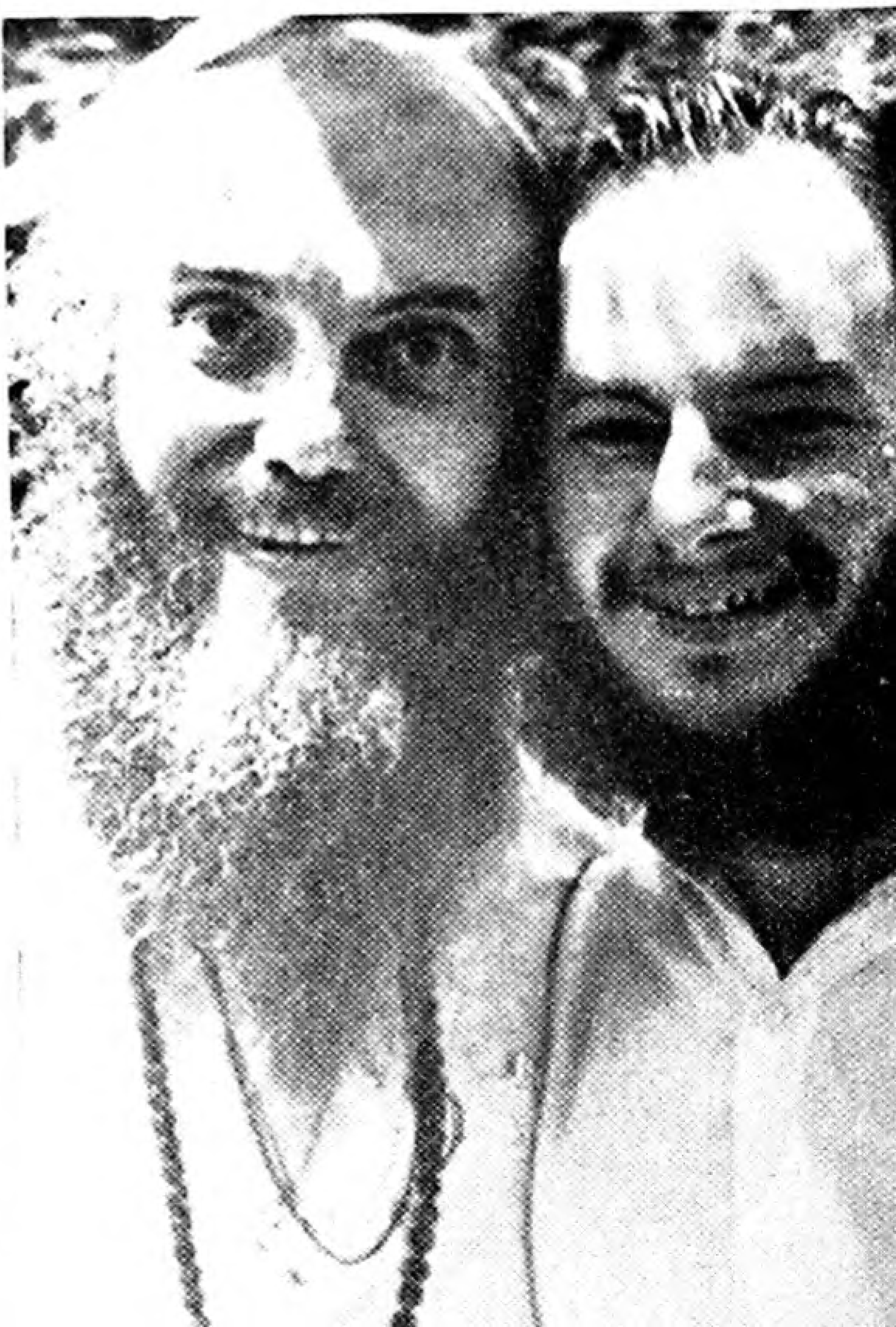
Tal in Ceylon, just after meeting Baba.



Baba distributing vibhuti.

On the stage in front of Baba,
efore thousands at the birthday festival.
d Tal.

Tal Brooke and Ram Dass, after Baba met him—12 March 1971.



COME TO BHAGA
RI SATYA S BABA

A welcome ceremony.

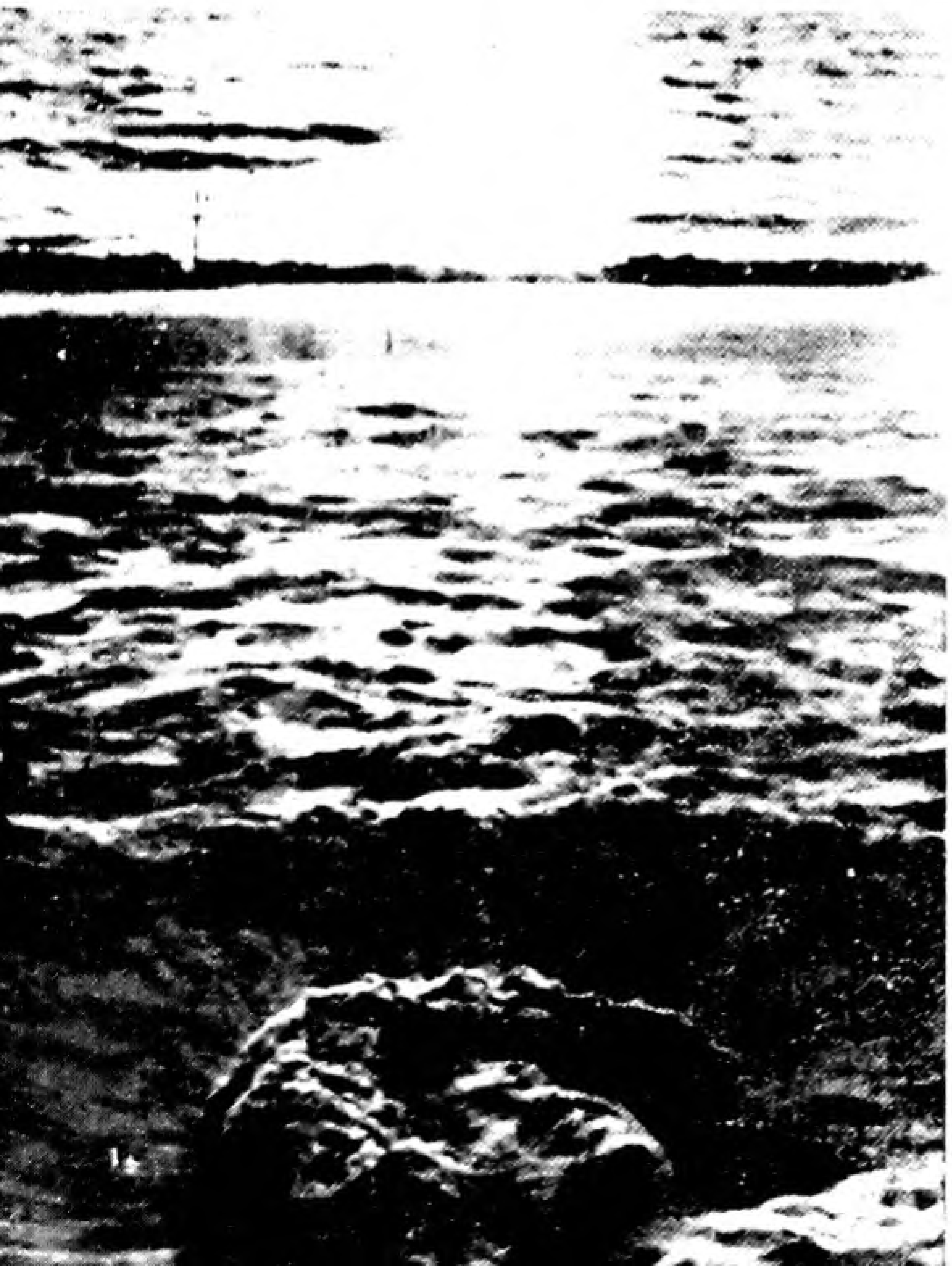
he Dashara festival, fall of 1970. Leading the Bhajans on stage are Bruce and T
Baba is adjusting the microphone and speaking to Tal.

Howard watch Wendel making the "Sand Baba."

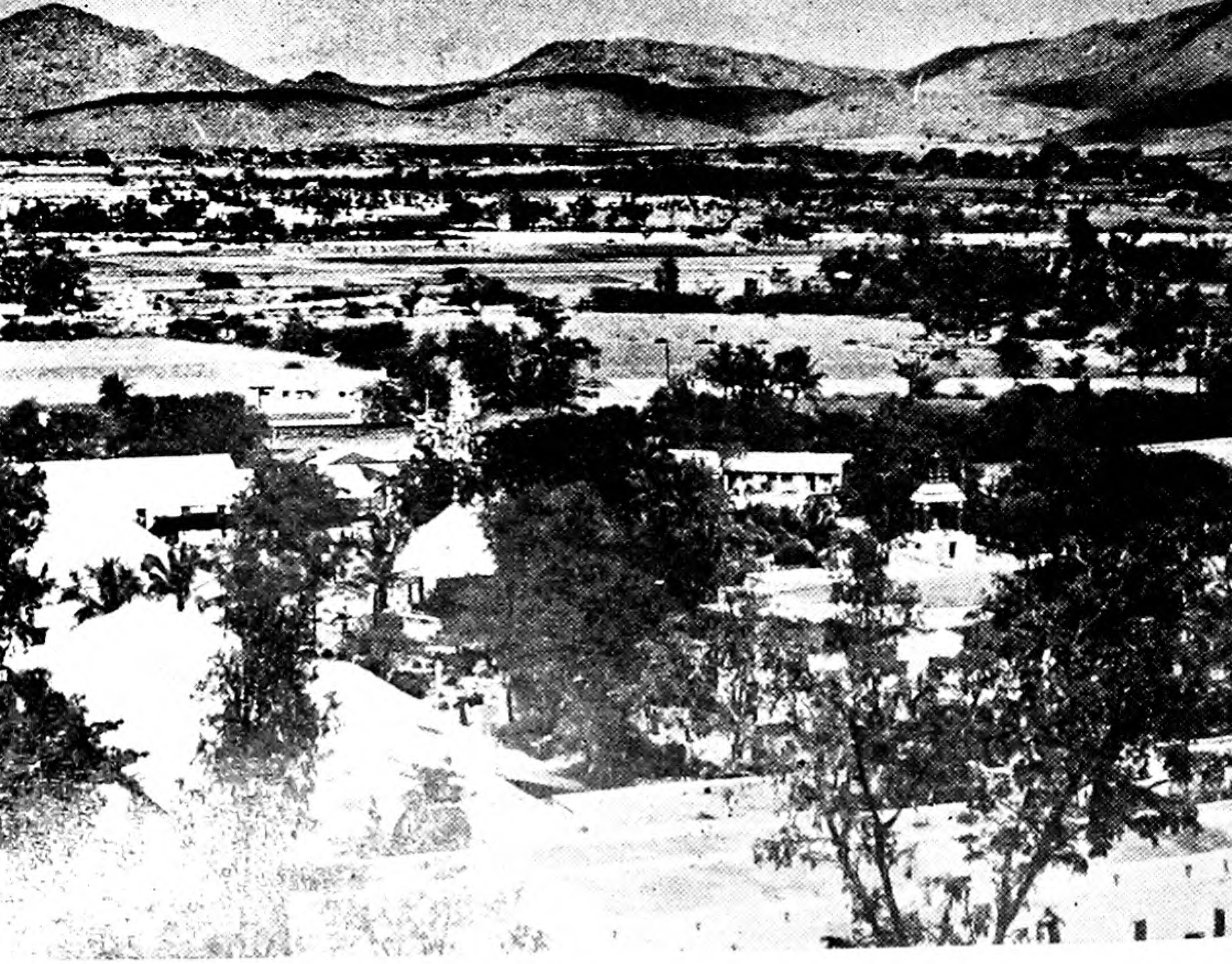
Baba giving darshan.

Tal Brooke, before leaving for India.

The "Sand Baba."



Geeta garlanding Baba.



A hilltop view of Baba's main ashram Prasanthi Nilayam.

D[illegible] [illegible]pping Sai Baba at the Bombay auditorium, Dharmakshetra

housing resembled a large rectangular bathysphere lowered from the heavens. Baba had access to it by a stair-well, off to one side of his downstairs living room, that let out on to the roof across from the housing. The exit, a small enclosure of concrete and steel, resembled a hatch on the deck of a ship. In fact the whole roof and "command tower" had a nautical look, enhanced by the low tinted windows on the front of the house.

The males were given the roof, exclusively, for private quarters. We also had a downstairs side room right off the living room. It was a mirror image of the interview room, but on the rear side of the house. Previously used for storage, it had a couch and several chairs, plus a small rotund porch with pillars facing Gita's stake and the apple grove. There, we could read, meditate, store luggage, and sleep. Though practically the entire lot of us chose to sleep on the roof, where at night, we could gaze into the mysteries of the black heavens above, feel the cool aromatic breeze from the gardens and orchards, celebrate the unique privilege and mystery of being allowed to sleep only yards away from the "holy of holies," the private domicile of the god-man on earth.

The side room led into an adjacent-hall, where on one side, was Baba's private stair-well to the roof enclosure, and opposite it was a door into Baba's front living room, starting with the wing that we visited during the school festival. This door was usually closed and we were not generally encouraged to open it. Outside, further down the rear side of the house was the rather inconspicuous entrance into Raja Reddy's little suite, and after that, the back door of the kitchen. The apple orchard bordered on our side room, and towards the back of the kouse, opening into the area that resembled the Louisiana backlands. About fifteen yards from Raja's and our doors, in a clearing amongst the trees, was the stake for Gita, Baba's elephant.

The men were escorted through the living room, by several rooms, down a back hall through a doorway into the large stone *bhajan*-hall, and then over to the left, where a large two-panelled doorway opened up into Baba's dining room. As is the Indian custom, men were to eat first, which was the first big disappointment for the girls.

Already sitting in the dining room along the floor were about seven or eight Indians, from Raja Reddy, the closest disciple, to ultra close devotees such as Gokkak, then Vice-Chancellor of Bangalore University, and Mr Appah, Chairman of the Mysore

State Electricity Board. The room was large enough to hold perhaps forty to fifty Indians, sitting around three walls, and lined up in rows along the center of the room. Woven leaf plates were set up for about thirty people at the most. At the head of the room, overlooking the devotees on the floor, was Baba's private table and chair, with white table cloth, canister of refrigerated water, and accoutrements such as containers of lime pickle, chutney, and the like. To Baba's rear right, was his private refrigerator where there was always ample cold water for him. In the rear corner of the room opposite Baba, was the large serving table containing a large variety of south Indian vegetarian food of the highest quality. The cook, I found out later, was also the private servant of Raja Reddy, and in a sense a disciple-chef.

After having us recite "Asathoma . . .sat gamaya.," Baba permitted the meal to begin as he occasionally initiated chatter to one of the Indians, always matter of factly in the spirit of family business. My main fight was to keep in mind the tertiary importance of the food in comparison to the landmark boon of attending a Baba "family" supper. And I was afraid that my gnawing hunger would steal away the significance of the occasion like some kind of opiate, filling the senses while dulling the mind. After my first bite, I fully realized what I was up against, as the servant ran by me with twenty different types of flavourful concoctions, including table-spoons of ghee (extra refined butter oil). By the end of the meal, I had the intelligence of a brick, and knew that the only way to hide the dull glaze of my swollen eyes was to look pensively at the floor as though reverently enshrining the occasion in my mind. Whether this was because of monumental gluttony, or some esoteric mixture of spices and pepper, I wasn't sure. I Just didn't want the eager girls to see my undeserving reaction to the boon.

The next evening Baba sent word that there would be private *bhajans* in the hall at eight. Since nothing was mentioned about dinner, we learned that the previous night was a special occasion, and that we were to continue as before, cooking in the little side room near our old classroom-dorms. By eight we just managed to finish dinner in time and run into the *bhajan*-hall, where the Indian women were already sitting against the back wall, including Baba's eighty-six year old mother.

As we had been attending such *bhajans* for over a week, prior to moving into Baba's house, some of the word patterns were at least beginning to be identifiable to me, but not much more than that. Those of us Baba insisted should sit along the front row were Gill, Bruce, Peter, and me, of which any of the last three named would be picked randomly by Baba to sing what we had memorized so far of a given *bhajan*. After one of us had led a phrase, the others would repeat it after a brief pause. We kept timing with handclaps, and Baba had elaborate clackers with which he could keep flawless time.

Any mistake made by one of the singers was invariably seized upon as an object of humour, where the accent, the tempo, or the manner would be mimicked by Baba, usually putting the whole crowd into a dizzy uproar. This was known as the playful or Krishna aspect of Baba; Gill once said in Ananthapur that when Baba is at Brindavan, he's more like Krishna or one of the guys, but at Puttaparthi you begin to see his power and awesomeness, as he's suddenly become impersonal again.

Baba let the "ladies" battle it out as to who would sing, which would involve all kinds of last-minute signals and other interesting types of glances, some less friendly than others. If the signals didn't work, then two or three of the girls would start up simultaneously making a dreadful noise, bringing guffaws from some of the Indian womens in the back, and knowing looks of empathy from us. Then they would back down in a supreme act of etiquette, denying self, and abandoning the floor to others. After a long silence, two or three might decide simultaneously to carry the ball since no one else was going to do it. And it would start all over again, until the most bull-headed won. Ultimately the two ladies who came out victorious were Vicky and Michelle. They'd try, and then try harder, and if they blew it, there would be a look of anguish, but they both kept mopping it up. Now and then they sang together, and that sounded better.

Of the males, Bruce's voice was rumoured to sound the best, though I felt that it utterly lacked resonance, body and depth, sounding sort of wispy in the end—not the rich chest timbre that a good singer should have. My voice was probably the worst at the beginning, full of all kinds of timbre, of the saw-mill variety. But I attributed that to the fact that I hadn't sung since I was twelve—when I retired at the height of my singing career, almost able to sound like Elvis Presley. Finally Baba got Bruce and me to join up, Bruce navigating the direction of the song as I tried to give it spirit.

Now and then everyone was startled by a new person suddenly cranking up in some remote corner. One of them was Bob Conger, the gardener, in the habit now of wearing coloured cotton suits especially tailored for him—perhaps so that he could stand out. The amazing thing was that as horrible as it sounded, he went on as though he was positive that it was a gift from the heavens. Finally when I saw Baba's face break into a sneer, I went on from there, clearing my throat, looking at the ceiling, and finally managed to get Bruce to join me in harmonizing it. Finally he stopped, looking away in righteous condescension, as though he was incapable of error. This trait in him alone let me know that as a disciple he wouldn't last.

The worst one though was Jai, sharing his latest inspiration, a new song about Lolita Devi. Like a bull in a china shop, he bellowed on, looking off into the distance obliviously, perhaps gatherting the expression on some of our faces. His chagging got faster and faster as new incredibly long Sanskrit words sledgehammered past in syllables like freight cars. About the time I wanted to gag him, Baba gave a tolerant but firm hand signal, "*bas, bas* . . . ."

Baba wanted some English songs so Gill led "Kumbaya, Someone's singin' Lord, Kumbaya . . ." then the whole group chimed in with, "He's got the whole world in his hands."

When Baba himself started singing, the girls would sigh, and I would campare his magnificent control with our lack of it, as he would initiate and carry off the most complicated voice warbles, so typical of Indian singing. At one time he did a highly skilled twenty-minute ballad of Ram's wedding—interchanging the parts of the characters, and singing with remarkable speed and agility, while defining complicated beats with the clackers. And not only was it flawless, but the melody I thought was beautiful, with dashes of regal splendour and long romantic, indeed winsome, refrains. By the end of it the womens side was leaning forward starstruck, like the "Girls of Saint Trinians," watching Rudolf Valentino.

Throughout the rest of the week, we continued to have *bhajans* with Baba every night. Yet our days, except for brief interludes with him on the roof or in the side room, were pretty much as they had been before.

It seemed that on a fair number of occasions Baba was away for the evening, going into Bangalore to eat with devotees or off to Ananthapur for a brief jaunt.

Little things that were strung together out of the ordinary, as the days passed were, first of all, a mutual reconciliation between Gill and me. He walked up to a fountain where I was sitting alone thinking. I kept ignoring him until he was right up to me. He smiled, stretched out his hand, and we shook. On another occasion Baba met us in the side room, joked for a while, "Eat a little, sleep a little, drink a little, smoke a little," and suddenly asked, with a look of concern, "where is that fat yogi?" Jai had missed several *bhajans* as well as a number of private meetings like this and my patience was wearing out. "Baba, Jai is in Bangalore or some place like that." Baba replied with irritation, "Very confused, looking here, looking there—hurting himself." Then Baba introduced us to a local tailor who had moved all his gear into our side room, including yards and yards of bright red and orange silk. The man, sitting at a foot-driven sewing machine, was making tens and tens of Baba gowns—apparently he did this quite often, as Baba was rumoured to wear a gown only a few times, then give it out to some special devotee.

Suddenly Baba commanded everybody, including the tailor, out onto the front porch. With hands on hips, and chewing a betal leaf, Baba told the tailor jibingly, "Measure all the Rowdies." He gave each of us a number and, by the end of the day, we were all reconvened. Baba, standing beside the tailor, called out our numbers, and we marched up to receive a bang on the head and a pair of striped pajamas. All eleven of us had identical coloured striped pajamas. We went in, put them on, and stood in a row to be inspected by Baba—as Gill remarked, "This is the funkiest thing I've seen yet." Jai missed out on his pair of pajamas. When he came back later and heard about it, he glumly said "Oh," taking it as an omen. I asked him where he had been, and he told me, Siva Bala Yogi. I told him to really consider what he was doing.

A couple of days later, around 25 June I was alone in the side room sitting on the couch. While the tailor was humming away making bright red Baba gowns, and chatting occasionally, I read The Holy Bible—a copy of the New English Bible that I had picked up from one of the Bangalore bookstores. I was into Saint John's Revelation, but managed to carefully avoid the rest. After just having read about "Faithful and True" wearing a "blood red robe" and riding a white horse (a lot of us had discussed

Baba's being the Kalki Avatar, tenth incarnation of Vishnu who would appear in the *Kali Yoga*, age of wickedness, riding a white horse and wearing blood red), I got hung-up on Chapter Thirteen. Verse 11 through 15 said (in The Living Bible):

> Then I saw another strange animal, this one coming out of the earth, with two little horns like those of a lamb but a fearsome voice like the Dragon's. He exercised all the authority of the Creature whose death-wound had been healed, whom he required all the world to worship. He did unbelievable miracles such as making fire flame down to earth from the skies while everyone was watching. By these miracles, he was deceiving people everywhere. He could do these marvellous things whenever the first creature was there to watch him. And he ordered the people of the world to make a great statue of the first Creature, who was fatally wounded and then came back to life. He was permitted to give breath to this statue and even make it speak! Then the statue ordered that anyone refusing to worship it must die!

Around the time I got to the number "666," the key to the identity of the Beast, I saw a flash of red, and Baba walked in. Feeling a peculiar significance in the moment, I decided to ask Baba, since he was omniscient, what it meant. Emitting a soft playful aura, Baba practically swaggered over to me, took the book from my hands, and started reading where I had my finger. He could barely say the words, in fact much of it was word skipping and word blending. Baba gave me an odd smile, made a silly grimace, and then blew me a loud kiss, turned around and exited, saying something like "the great and the small, will be all in all."

Later Kerry, Janet, and I were talking, after I had mentioned this, and she looked bothered. We moved back to a rear fountain, and Janet said that the day the girls moved in, Baba gave her a similar test "He just walked into the *bhajan*-hall in a straight line, no facial expression, right up to me, and clicked his fingers with such force that it sounded like a fire-cracker. He almost looked wrathful. His face relaxed, and he walked on. Boy, he was telling us that if he wanted, he had the power to vaporize us. I mean, it really scared me."

By 26 June these tests were forgotten as Baba cheerfully came up to me and said, "Get everybody ready. This afternoon everybody will go to tour Mr Jawa's Joy ice-cream factory in Whitefield. Swami coming too . . . no not necessary for everybody to wear the striped pajamas, they are only for sleeping in, not a uniform for yogis."

Feeling like an excerpt from the Betale's "Magical Mystery Tour," we all lined up at the gate as a giant ice-cream van, painted in gay colours, backed up to load us on. All seventeen of us crammed in, sitting on crates, and drop clothes as the van roared off following Baba's car. The entire compound devotees cheered "Jai Sai Ram."

On a desolate compound on top a hill, sat a modern factory. We pulled by the guard at the barbed wirefence and strained to get up the steep incline. Once out, the plant manager proceeded to show Baba around as we followed. Mr Jawa, one of Baba's closest devotees, a multi-millionaire from Bombay who owned such plants all over India, was also permitted to come along by a loving invitation from Baba. Going from room to room, by supercoolers, miles of tubing, various huge gadgets, and cauldrons, some of the more daring of us walked into the freezer room in our thin cotton outfits behind Baba, who may have been barefooted. It was sub-freezing. Other than a winter's night on a tiger reserve in Rajasthan, where it approached freezing. the lowest temperature I had felt in my nine months in India so far was in the sixties. And that was on a wet monsoon day a few weeks back, only two miles down the road at Brindavan. After the tour we ate as though ice-cream was the source of life.

The following days were packed with activity. Baba soon planned to send us on ahead to the Andhra Pradesh ashram, "the wilderness." Baba called the men up to the roof, found a polaroid camera, explained to one of his devotee-servants how to work it, and then assembled us in different formations with him for "souvenir pictures." One of them, he said, would go into his monthly ashram magazine, *Sanathana Sarathi*. Then he took everybody on a tour of the grounds, by the rear carpenter sheds, the cow stalls, by the groves, and to Gita's stake. Pictures were taken of the whole group there, Baba slapped the elephant on the rear, looked at it in mock wonder, for a second the corners of his mouth bent into a lewd smile, then addressed the attendants in Telugu, who nodded mutely. After that, we had an afternoon interview with teachings on faith, devotion, self-sacrifice, and detachment.

That night, the evening *bhajan* was a special affair. After assembling in the *bhajan*-hall, Baba led us into the front living room. He had a guest. All of a sudden the mouths of Anthony and Vicky dropped. Anthony whispered in my ear, "That's Swami Chinmayananda, the guru I told you about we met in Kerala before we met Baba, the erudite Vedantist. That's him. Funny he should be here; when we were staying with him, he always criticized the avatars in his public statements, and publications, saying that Rama, Krishna, and Christ all died violent deaths."

Baba sat in his large stuffed chair, and plopped me down right in front of him, so that in our wing of the living room everybody could fit. I was so squeezed in I had to use Baba's knees as an armrest. Meanwhile Baba conducted the *bhajans* above us with his clackers.

As we sang several songs, ending the whole show in English, Chinmayananda, a tall bearded intellectual, austere type, who also wore the ochre guru colours, nodded in almost embarrassed approval. Then Baba walked over to his wing of the room, as we watched, sat next to the visiting swami, and began conversing with him.

Then as Chinmayananda, who spoke impeccable English, looked on, Baba explained to us in his usual simpler brand of English what had happened. "See, Chinmayananda at local hospital with many medical problems—ulcers, lung perforation, blood disease, a hole in the heart, and finally gangrene. Doctors say his prognosis is certain death. They take X-rays, many tests, give him glucose, blood transfusion, but condition worsening all the time. Well, swami knows. I go for the past week visiting him several times in the afternoon. One day, I materialize some *vibhuti*"—we all laugh knowingly—"and rub it on affected parts, then give him some to drink in a glass of water. Now *bas*, out of the hospital, a great mystery to the doctors there. Now health is recovering—eh Chinmayananda?"—who nods his head graciously. "Now he can return to northern India on his tour, and continue his work, teaching *sadhna*, yoga." Baba smiled. "Whenever there is true teaching, there I am also."

Chinmayananda said a few words stiffly, tugging underneath to handle the miracle nonchalantly, then made an obeisant gesture to Baba, and then to us, and left, stepping into a chauffeured Sedan. He had already appeared at several *bhajans* with some of his main disciples, who had come a number of times without him. One, a wealthy young Indian woman, whose family supplied the car had been with him, physically supporting him at the *darshans.*

Baba concluded the evening with humerous disgust. "Chinmayananda's guru told him many years ago, 'stay in the cave and do *tapas* and meditations for thirteen years, then you will be ready. Do not come out before then.' Chinmayananda is in cave eleven and a half years and thinks 'I'm ready I'm ready, I have reached the goal.' So he comes out and starts mission. He gets many devotees, cars, goes on tour." Baba concluded sadly, "Now is getting sick, past *karma* catching up with him, and he is getting more worldly desires. Just like J. Krishnamurthi. Now Krishnamurthi is suing his twenty years Secretary, Mr Rajagopal, who is now a devotee of mine—all pride—getting more worldly desires not peace. Krishnamurthi seventy years old man, new trying to take a wife. Very sad," Baba laughed disgustedly.

On one of our final meetings with Baba, the next night or so, before he was to leave the following morning on a day's tour to Madras, and we were to leave for Puttaparthi, there was a strange incident that broke up our meeting. After an hour of stories, Baba started instructing us about food acceptable to eat. Just about the time the girls were giggling, assuming that he was jibing them, since his advice this time was contradicting his advice on former occasions (previously stating that potatoes, and other root vegetables were untouchable due to dirty irrigation techniques; but suddenly, they were Ok now . . . "carrots, potatoes, turnips, radishes is good"), a servant ran into the interview room informing Baba of something. Then Raja Reddy stood in the door, and verified it. Before they had appeared, Baba kept on with his teaching, almost baffled by the group's laughter, straining to smile. I felt very uneasy because I sensed he didn't like it. Somehow it was disrespectful, and I didn't want us to lose our grace by a thoughtless mistake. So I didn't laugh at all.

Now in a flash, Baba was up from his chair almost yelling nervously, and apparently giving instructions. After a few minutes he reappeared in the doorway, speaking with assurance, but still seeming shaken underneath. "Five minutes ago the small child of one of the servants kidnapped and smuggled out in a truck . . . ." Suddenly there was yelling again, and Baba disappeared for the evening. After five minutes alone in the interview room, we gathered it was over and left, some of us worried about the kid, some smugly confident that Baba had everything under control.

Trying to sleep on the roof, way into the late hours of the night we heard discussions, cars stopping and starting, and what not. Some of us wondered in whispers—"Why didn't Baba know of it while it was happening? or why didn't he foresee it? Why did he appear nervous, since that seemed to indicate that something was at stake? Why couldn't he re-materialize the kid. Something like that was an insult to Baba. Besides the crying of one of the servants indicated lack of faith in Baba. How could someone have the privilege of working in Baba's house, and yet, doubt him even now?"

That morning as we were to leave, with all our bags on the drive, Baba gave us a brief session. All smiles and full of assurance, he described how Raja Reddy, following his instructions, had managed to track the thief down in half an hour, and recover the kidnapped child. That it was an ill-conceived plot to expose him and extort money for the child, and the result of all futile attempts like this ended such people opposing Baba's mission like this, in jail. With a pitying laugh of triumph for that particular category of fools, Baba stated, "Nothing and nobody can oppose my mission. I have come to establish *dharma*, the laws of god, and no tricks can slow down my divine mission."

Patting us on the backs, Baba said, "Go now to Puttaparthi, take these cars into Bangalore, and get onto a special bus. Swami has reserved an entire bus for near and dear ones. In a few days I will come to Puttaparthi." As some of us remarked later while packing the three cars, waving goodbye to Baba was like being an English school lad on his way to boarding-school waving goodbye to mom. I certainly knew, after being in Puttaparthi once already, that it would be a much different style of life, and that it would take some of us quite some time to fully appreciate the golden era here at Brindavan. Many of our group had never seen the other ashram with its heat, and poor food, and I felt glad that I was already a veteran in that sense.

By that evening, at seven o'clock, we were there, and absolutely shaken to bits. The bus ride had been twelve hours of noise and dust, and as it turned out, not a whole private bus, but merely reserved seats on the usual overcrowded daily bus from Bangalore to Puttaparthi. Most of us had kept *bhajans* going for a long time, but after while it was too exhausting an effort, and our repertoire was too limited. What we didn't know was that we would remain in Puttaparthi for a seeming eternity, five months altogether, from 29 June until 25 November. That is, those of us in the group who were devoted enough to the inconveniences of finding truth that this required. As we threw down our bags on the long stone walkway across the luxury suites, I looked up at the ragged skyline of rocks and jagged hills in the sunset. I thought once again that if anything had ever reminded me of "God's anvil" that bleak and tortuous desert in Lawrence of Arabia, this was it.

Kasturi came up, and we exchanged *namaste's*. Apparently he had gotten word that we were on the way up, and so led us to our rooms, the row of cubicles across from the "luxury suites." The males got two rooms to store bags; one of them turned out to be the same room that Jai, Michelle, and I had used for the Mahasivaratri festival. However because it was so hot, all seventeen of us laid our bedding right down the twenty-cubicle stone porch in a long row, the males in one strip, the females in another. The girls were stationed around their room, maybe ten doors down from us, nearer the side gate.

Before the elements would begin to eat us away, the newer people had time to run around, and buzz off the novelty of the whole place. They were amazed at Baba's huge hall, the hospital on the hill, the press, the ashram canteen, and the weird, almost volcanic, landscape. Then when they bit into their first bite of food, they began to slow down a little.

When only a few of us had been here, as was the case the last time, it was OK, we didn't draw too much attention. But now we stood out like albinos at a mau-mau convention. Our size, shape, colour, and habits were obviously different. And some of our dress was unmentionable to the Indians. Not only that, but like all "Americans," we did something that is unthinkable to an Indian. We immediately befriended all the local dogs. "We" meaning just about everybody but me. I couldn't complete the transference. For one thing, these things were two-dimensional instead of three, and had the dispositions of desert rats. And when they were shown even an iota of affection, never seeing it from a human before, they were as hard to pull away as a large octupus. And they smelled, and they had sores and bleeding lesions, and bugs of every description, and all types of internal worms, and I feared, some of them had the one disease that you don't fool around with, foaming at the mouth disease, rabies. Everytime you got bit, it would mean twenty-one large injections in the tummy. To risk not doing it would mean that you would die, once the infection started, because nothing after that works, not even the injections. And so should one nip you at three a.m. because you rolled over· You might sleep through it and wake up one day a few weeks later, foaming at the mouth and screaming. And everybody but a GP would assume you were enlightened, and had entered *Turya Samadhi.*

By our third night all the dogs had names given to them, most of them originating from either Bruce or me—"Dying Dog, Boscene Dog,"—later changed to "Boscenes a Doggies," with a Mexican accent, "Tinker Toy Dog, Reindeer Dog, Desert Demon, etc·" And anybody with a grain of intelligence went to bed on the porch with a club by his side. And it got bad. They would sneak over, flop right on top of you, and if you smacked them, they would go away for half an hour, and go through the whole routine again. The thing was that they could afford to stay up all night, and we couldn't. If we did, we were shot the next day. And sometimes we would wake up at two a.m. amidst a sound that was like a game of "Hot Potato" in the centre of hell, using a hydrogen bomb.

They'd be about three inches from our faces snarling, and twirling away fighting over who's going to flop down on your mat. And when these sounds started going off in series, from night to night, I seriously began trying to reason with the American bhaktas. "If you show'em more affection, it's gonna get worse. Cut'em off now, before you end up with rabies. I know its pitiful. But if we start here, we'll have to borrow a billion dollars from the Bank of America, get a fleet of helicopters and cover all of India, to be fair, dropping tons of beef bones· But then we'd have the problem of starving people, and that's even more tragic than the dogs. Have you ever seen Calcutta, any of you? Well, I have and it's a horror show. Now they're probably going to get reborn higher up on the scale, so maybe, death would be an ultimate relief, who knows." finally the group consensus of the males was that the kindest thing to do would be to go off and get an arsenal of forty-four magnums, howitzers, and sten guns, and blow them off the face of the earth· To put them out of their misery.

But of course that would contradict the Hindu doctrine of *Ahimsa*, non-injury to others, so everything on the bleeding landscape suffered because it was neither dead nor truly alive. It just kept on reproducing and suffering the consequences.

Baba appeared within a week of our arrival, on 2 July, stayed two days, and promptly left until the Guru Purnima festival in late July.

On the first evening of Baba's arrival, as it was geettin dark, Kasturi came over to me and said, "Baba wants to talk to you and Bruce privately, as well as Michelle, and one other." Feeling the secretiveness of it, I ran off to the front of the *bhajan*-hall as quietly as possible, gathering Bruce on the way. Baba was standing at his door in front of a large crowd of Indians, and quickly motioned us in. As we were entering, all of a sudden a new girl named Jnani appeared, who was one of the few people out of our group that repelled me—she was like a Disney cartoon of little Miss Pugnella, the neurotic school teacher. She didn't talk, she yammered in falsetto, always conveying her poignant awareness of things, yet constantly emitting a vibe of self-abasement.

Baba looked irritated that she had raced around the hall. Meanwhile she yammered, "I just got this inner urge, this calling to come, oh, let me in, please Baba." And I could feel myself saying underneath, "If only we had run a little faster," because I already knew why we had been called. It was for a special letter to the authorities to grant residence permits. As it happened, a large number of the "American bhaktas" were not American. Kerry and Janet had Canadian Commonwealth passports that exempted them from visas, the same with Anthony and Vicky, Sandy and Zolt, Peter and Martin, and Hans and Benno (Germans did't have the trouble we did—maybe, that was because Americans were the only villains—we were the ones who actually started World War II and it was the Germans who launched such a noble salvaging effort across the world).

The ones who were put to the test by this were Jai, Howard, Tony, Bob, Gill, India, and Marsha.

My feeling about Jnani remained that Baba's grace had not been favourably disposed to her, that rather she had stumbled on to it, and gotten the fountain while it had been turned on.

Once inside, Baba grabbed my arm talking softly and said, "See, I am writing you a special letter for residence permit to stay in India. I want you to stay with me. Special trainees." He gave us a sheet of paper to sign with our complete names. When he saw that I was left-handed, his eyes lit up, and he laughed, "Complete Rowdie," I smiled back proudly.

He instructed Bruce, Michelle, and me not to be afraid, but to go ahead and begin leading *bhajans* in the big hall at the two daily *bhajans*. That he would explicitly authorize it to Kasturi, the temple priest, and Kalyan, and make sure that everyone understood that it was his will. Ten minutes later we left with butterflies in our stomachs. The responsibility of singing in the temple, in a foreign language twice a day to up to a thousand people was almost more than I wanted. Yet I did want it—it was a clear foot in the door as far as his world mission was concerned, and further proof of my acceptance.

Before Baba left the next day, he gave one of the *harmoniums* that he had in storage to Bruce and me to practice with. Kalyan was then instructed to come over each day and teach us. The girls too were given permission to work with Vijaya, and use a *harmonium*; Michelle and Vickie, being the final obvious choice. Likewise, all the other Americans were included in a programme. Baba arranged for the seventy-eight year old Pandit and Sastry who was the teacher of the Vedas at the boy's school, to begin Sanskrit lessons starting every morning in the center metal-shed in the side compound. Classes would last two hours. We would learn to read, write, and know the meaning of such words as *Tryam ba kam*.

This essentially packed our days from dawn till early evening, increasing group solidarity, at least in the long-distance runners. Though after about a month or so, most of the people dropped out of the Sanskrit class because it turned into a rote memory chore of memorizing tenses, rather than discussing the epics and *Puranas*. And besides the Sastry was thing of a complete exhaustive programme which would have probably taken at least ten years.

Another group activity, after Baba left, was a day to day story-reading by Kasturi, who had been given the official title by Baba, as, "the mother-in-law." He read letters of faith from devotees, parts of different books, including the manuscript of one of the "Older Americans," whom we had seen in Whitefield, an Australian Theosophist named Murphet, who was now based in Adyar, Madras, and publishing a book on Baba, chronicalling the major miracles.

One of the people included in the listening was a disagreeable stumpy little woman, Dr Vijaya Laxmi, second in command at the hospital, who seemed to have a competitive sore spot for foreigners, and pressed her authority as far as she possibly could. Now and then Kasturi corrected her like a little girl, or told her to be quiet, and she obeyed implicitly. She had been with Baba from the very start, part of the old guard, like Kasturi, that had become enchanted with Baba before his world mission in the early 1950s, when he was in his early twenties. This did not exempt an element of romance from entering in either, I suspected. Baba as a youth was extremely good-looking, in a sensual way, and she had just finished medical school in London. I assumed later that she had been treated as a second-class citizen, and because of that, had a thing against foreigners. And like many European educated Indians was probably waiting to find, as was the case with Gandhi and Sri Aurobindo, that vital piece of evidence that would elevate India into a position of superiority over every nation in the world, that is, India's massive ancient stockpile of spiritual conquests, with its long geneologies of avatars, Messiahs, and super-yogis. Now that she had found it, the only problem was that Baba had virtually not said anything to her in about ten years. And it was the foreigners, the "fore-nears," who were getting all the attention.

Well, almost all the "fore-nears." Jai, Howard, Tony, and Bob were dropping out fast and punting the ball. A week or so after Baba had left, they all went back to Bangalore to apply as residents for Mysore State. The officials told them that without a letter from a resident-sponsor, their chances were nil. A month later, after the coming festival, Tony finally freaked! He blew his stack with the visa people, the ashram authorities, and finally proclaimed the whole thing a "buncha-junk," heading back overland ultimately to New York city, where he had been a cab driver. A month later in August, Peter, the young Australian, got a letter from Tony saying, "OK, you promised you'd give me anything I asked for. Well I've been hustled here in Copenhagen, I did some dope, some balling, and now I need a hundred bucks to get out. Howza about sendin it like a good buddy, eh?"

Peter told Tony that he thought he was blowing it, that he didn't have the cash, and got an absolutely demonic reply that had to be immediately burnt outside the ashram.

Though I had warned Jai to forebear with Baba and subject himself to every leap of faith required, and that he'd come through all right in the end, he went his own way. A week or so later he came back from Bangalore to get his bags. Like a sulking mistreated kid, Jai told me the story, "Look, the Indian authorities are the most difficult people I know, it took me over six months in New York just to get a three-month tourist visa. Well, that visa runs out in a coupla days, and if I don't leave the country then, they can expel me forever. That means no guru and no enlightenment. Not only that, but I have spent all I own to do this—first I stay in India. Then, I find a way to stay with Baba." The way Jai had solved this problem was to run straight over to Siva Bala Yogi and ask for a letter. He got it, but it was conditional. Now he had to be a full-time hundred percent disciple of Bala Yogi; utterly obedient, devoted, and dependent upon him for food and alms. Jai gulped when I informed him that this was it, as far as Baba was concerned for this lifetime, and had he not already signed the dotted line it would be different. What made the stalemate even worse was that Jai was no longer as sure that Siva Bala Yogi was the right one for him, even as an alternative to Baba. Jai finally pleaded that he had no other choice, and I told him, "wrong." Howard was in the same position, but had decided to throw everything in for Baba.

Howard came over, looking a little more positive since I had given him a pep talk. He explained to Jai, speaking English but with Indian mannerisms and accent "Swami will come through in the end. This is just a test. Before I had many doubts, but now that he sees my faith he will get my visa. Visas are nothing to him—this is just a show. Whatever happens I am not leaving here. They will have to come to arrest me to get me away." And then I concluded, "Yeah Jai, come on, you've read Yogananda's, *Autobiography of a Yogi.* You know what he did to prove his worthiness to the guru. This thing about the visas is kindergarten compared to that stuff. I can't believe you're bailing out at the first obstacle. You know as well as I do that he has the power to reverse any event. Maybe he's testing you because he knew you'd panic like this, he's obviously zeroing into a particular area that needs strengthening."

Before the festival, Jai left for good, and Kerry, Janet, and I were amazed that this much weeding had started so early. Kerry finally summed up his view, "Baba works at a remarkable speed. You go through more changes and have to work through more crap when he's gone. I can't believe he's engineered this thing with about six different people." Janet finally predicted, "India and Marsha are going to make it through but I don't think Bob will." She was right, after a few more weeks, following the coming festival, as I myself had suspected, Bob was on the way to complete his world tour, as was usual, never conceding the possibility that he was capable of error. And when we reminded him of some of Baba's rebuttals, which he never heeded, and then Baba's consequent indifference to him, he just boarded the bus, and produced the most sickly sweet knowing smile he could muster. And I thought to myself, "rots of ruck Jack, you're going to get burned because you're a far cry from what you think you are."

Sure enough a month later, Peter, perhaps because he was the most tolerant, got a letter from another drop-out. It was Bob, proclaiming with a certain degree of pride that he had transcended sensuality, that he had experimented in brothels and with non-vegetarian food, and though it had brought him down initially, he was getting to the point where he could handle it.

Yet it was Jai who worried us (everyone except Gill, who by now had pitched Indra Devi's tent again and was off by himself and getting by with the minimum number of words to any of us). Michelle felt a certain degree of responsibility as Jai was from the same generation of Hilda disciples, and had come to India with her. And India and Marsha felt compassion. Meanwhile I chalked the whole thing up as a huge spiritual lesson and finally said, "To have Jai shot down in three months is a serious omen."

Another serious omen was something that crawled by my nose one morning, after scraping and scratching in the vicinity for half an hour. When the shadowy greys of around fivish started disappearing, I heard a yell. One of the girls was pointing at the bottom of my mat. I sat up, and spent the next three minutes watching a huge black scorpion march and skirmish in the area, occasionally raising its tail and dancing, and then lowering it, so that the whole thing was over six inches long when running. I recalled a Hatha yoga pamphlet in Rishikesh on how the ascetic in the forest should deal with a scorpion sting, since it was not only deadly, among certain species, but by far the most painful sting in the world. If the ascetic is stung on the chest near the heart, it recommened, the thing to do while in semi-paralytic agony, is try to survive the next twelve hours by totally regulated breathing, while lying on the forest floor. Do not move, but conserve all energy in order to breathe.

As I was deciding how to kill it, as painfully as possible, fire being my old favourite at least as far as ticks and bedbugs are concerned—Zolt came over with a box, and escorted it in with a stick. Then making a peace sign, he informed me that he was going off to another hill to let it loose, that killing it was out of the question. And I said, "Yeah you do that—that's a real spiritual idea just loaded with divine compassion. Let's see how you feel when you squat down to defecate, and sit on one of them or one of the local cobras." This episode did succeed in giving some of us second thoughts about running up the hill at night barefooted to relieve ourselves. I started wearing shoes again at night, and whenever, possible, brought matches or a flashlight.

During this rather arid spell between our arrival and the coming festival in late July, there appeared two new people out of six on the scene to come. They were a young couple from New York, another batch from Hilda's meditation group, and the guy, Eddie or Ed, was to become one of my very best friends. Chris, his girl friend, quickly blended in with the girls. A quiet spirit, tall, serene and docile, almost with a wholesome mid-Western demeanour, Chris was almost the complete opposite of Ed who was short, talked out of the side of his mouth in a thick Brooklyn accent, and came off at times like a con man at a race-track, or a one night stand "sick" comedian at Vegas. With curly hair, widow's peak, and sharp ears, his appearance at times suggested a devilish strain, and when he opened his mouth, or "the mouth," he talked in rapid testy sentences that resembled extracts from gangster movies. Yet I saw in him quite a soft spot—maybe that reminded me of myself—as well as a capacity for considerable loyalty.

They were put in the luxury suites since they were considered man and wife. In no time Kerry and Janet had befriended them and moved in, and practically all of us had access to a lavatory once again. Soon after that, many of us moved up to their screened-in porch to sleep unhampered by the dogs, and have "rap sessions" by candle-light until late at night.

Ed's first day at the ashram he had come loaded with pictures of gurus, tapes, stories, and messages from Hilda to various people. He was in fairly low spirits, because he had just come from Nainital where the guru he wanted and had dreamed about, Maharajji, the guru of "Ram Dass," had sent him on his way simply stating, "I am not your guru."

Not that Ed hadn't been warned; he had. Ram Dass, ex-coworker of Timothy Leary, whom I had met with him, had met this guru about the time I came to India. Since then his name had been changed from Richard Alpert to Ram Dass, and he had toured the States extensively, giving darshans and proclaiming the esoteric teachings of Vedanta and India's chain of gurus. He himself had quite a following now, many of whom, like Ed, had become friends. When Ram Dass was in New York, one of the places where he stayed was at Ed's. But Ed was warned, "Maharajji is funny, unpredictable. He doesn't want a lot of followers, he doesn't want streams of turned on people coming over from America. He's a quiet hidden away little Master who looks like an ordinary fat old man wrapped up in a blanket, who happens to be merged with the cosmos. And if he hasn't called you as a disciple, he'll be quite blunt."

Maharajji had been uncommunicative with Ed on the whole, making occasional cryptic or puerile remarks, and then leaving Ed to puzzle them out. One day he ordered Ed and Chris to go off, and see the new Hanuman temple. Then another day he ordered them to go and visit the fruit-market in Nainital. When Ed would offer him an apple, he might hold it up to his eye as though looking through it, or polish it and hand it back. Finally after Ed and Chris had been hanging around for a week or more, he called them into his house to chat with them. After 'playing' with them for an hour, like a little kid, laughing and chatting about things, playing games with the fruit on the floor, and telling them things about themselves, he suddenly told them, "Go, I am not your guru. Your guru is in the South—he is greater than an avadhut, his is a great mystery. Most yogis are one or two-rupee notes, he is a thousand-rupee note." Ed described his dilemma with pained humour, "Whadya supposed to do when ya hear that, roll over and die? I felt like I had my head kicked in. What's he want me to do to prove myself, do five hundred summa' saults with a banana in my eaya? I'll do it, hang from a tree like a monkey? just tell me. I had my heart set on this guy as being my guru, for months I meditated on him, people gave me all kinda assurances, and I get there man and he doesn't knowya. I'd thrown everything in for this guy, and what am I supposed to do? Go off an' look for a guru. Man I wanted to crawl in a hole, I was so shot, and India was so weird, I thought I'd flip out five miles outside Nainital. How am I supposed to go across the country, practically broke, lookin' for some guru?"

I replied, "Listen, I don't know about Maharajji, but I can tell you this guy here is like nobody you've ever seen or ever going to see. You've stumbled onto the New Jerusalem so don't complain. There's so much evidence about Baba, from the puranas to his miracles, that confirm the fact that he's an avatar that I don't know where to begin. Hang around with me for a while, and I'll tell you everything I know about him."

By the evening of the day they arrived. My future friend and I had a head run in. I walked up the stairs of the suite and heard Ed and Kerry arguing, about something, and I realized what a screamer Ed could be. The little aggressive guy was holding down the floor, and the tall angel couldn't get a word in edgewise. Considering myself the chief, I went in to settle the issue. It was great that he had joined our group, but he had to find out that start off humbly. In the meantime Ed had heard from Kerry and Janet that I was sort of the spokesman of the group, that is, the chief, and he didn't go for it. In fact before Ed could respect anybody he had to "check 'em out." Well, I already anticipated this about the little guy, and so while he figured he had me off guard, I went off like a bomb, fighting fire with fire, and I held the floor for ten minutes once I had started. I used almost everything I had. And knew that that should settle it from then on. From ten syllable words to Chicago street-metaphors I spread my awareness all over the room till it dawned on him that I was earnest and for real, and had a serious spiritual investment in finding the truth. I left with the air of the room still shuddering. Though Eddie was still making the expected background noise, he had been silenced. He knew it, and I knew it, as I knew from elementary school days at recess that unless you made a stand, this type of guy would never get off your back. But if you did, he would accept it once and for all, and end up respecting you. I was right. By the next day, Eddie and I went up on the hill, and a heart-to-heart talk, each telling the other his life story, and agreeing on the many similarities.

Eddie had a"super rough childhood," incredible problems with authority figures, especially after his mother died when he was around five. The only "religious guy" in his family was his uncle, who was a rabbi and the intellectual of the family. Eddie's dad was mainly interested in money. Being extremely perceptive about getting on "the system"bandwagon for its own sake, Ed couldn't see doing anything until he had some basic answers. Life grew from bad to worse, and by his teens he had dropped out of school, was hustling on the streets, and waiting for the "bird of paradise to flop out of the sky on the table" where he could see it. This didn't happen, so he went from psychedelics, to army jails, which he broke out several times, to Ram Dass, and finally to Hilda.

Conveying that his toughness was not that of a mindless brute, but a necessary mechanism to cover some hidden area of tremendous pain, that is, rather than be a whimperer, which he hated, he chose to stand up and yell. Ed shared with some sensitivity what he had come to realize. "Coca-cola machines weren't makin it, groovey hangouts weren't makin it, orgies weren't makin it, nothin was, and nobody had the answer. Finally I met Ram Dass, and I looked into his eyes, and he knew somethin. I wanted to find out what he knew. So he began to tell me. He told me about this little man up in the Himalayas, wrapped up in a blanket, who was the embodiment of love. I just about cried, because I saw the compassion in his eyes or somethin. He told me his whole experience, 'cause he felt somethin for me, and it just about blew my mind. I was ready to hop a plane that instant. Then I met Hilda, and she began to straighten me out. And I knew more and more that what I had been lookin for all the time was the divine mother. And one day I was checkin Hilda out to see how real she was, and she came through solid, and I began to realize that the divine mother was in her. I just put my head in her lap one day and cried. I didn't feel any shame, this is what I had been lookin for the whole time and didn't really know it."

The next day, someone who was presumably not the divine mother, entered the stage. And as I saw this tall carrot-topped woman loping along, I looked at her pale scrawny son, and said to myself almost without thinking, "Mechanical-repetition, verbigeration, emotional refrigeration, and retardation." There was a lost terror in the boy's eyes as he seemed mysteriously guided to do impishly compulsive things without letup, throwing stones in the air, pushing her, making weird howls, yanking away from her with sudden force. And I recognized instantly that it was an autistic child, as a battlefield of contradictory schools of thought welled up in me. One emitting encyclopaeldias of clinical theory very authoritatively, through umpteen different university courses on abnormal psychology and child disturbance, going through diagnosis, prognosis, etiology, and then functional versus organic explanations whether the orientation be behavior mod., molecular biology, Freudian, Jungian, Adlerian, Frommian, Bernian, or the expert of them all, Bruno Bettleheim, who was my favourite, and the inventor of the term "emotional refrigeration," that he applied to the parents of autistic children. On the other side of the wall was the metaphysical-spiritual schools of thought, whose propounders like Edgar Cayce, Joan, Grant, and Denys Kelsey, all blamed such things on *karma*, individual and corporate, to be worked out in individuals through different "sojourns of transmigration." Another suggestive impulse stated flatly, "there's a demon in the kid."

When the lady opened her mouth, the environmentalist argument gained in credibility. Even if it was a demon, if she had really had the capacity to love him as a whole person, a complete mother, it would have never entered him in the first place. I suspected that her deepest fear was of her incompleteness and her own sins of omission, because she seemed cloaked in the old familiar defensive garb of, "I'm not dirty, you're dirty . . . oooh you stink, but I'm as white as snow."

Talking like one-way communication system, rambling on, and doing the work of two people by asking questions then answering them or filling in what your answer was to have been, June introduced her background. "After several years of marriage to a guy I had gone to college with in Indiana, I had had it, and we divorced. At any rate I met a few supportive women, and after that, for the first time in my life, got involved in spiritual things, and I knew that here was where my inner searchings had always pointed. Well, we studied the Bible, and I developed a great love for Jesus. And I soon learned other things, an entire spiritual dimension. Someone had the *Essene Gospel*, and then I saw the, *Aquarian Gospel*, and got to know some of the deep things that are only traced over in the Bible. Well, I had Terry to take care of . . .Terry come here! . . . any way I had Terry to take care of and so moved to Santa Barbara, and began teaching elementary school. Well, it's been a long haul. At any rate I've always had an attachment to Jesus, and have always had doubts about straying away from Him. Well, one day I ran into Indra Devi, and saw so much wisdom and compassion in this woman I just wanted to cry. Later on she told me about Baba, that he is here in this world, and is the same as Jesus. Well it was just too incredible to be true . . . "

Terry was now grabbing handfuls of sand and rocks, and spasmodically throwing them up in the air in all directions, but mostly right over his head. I had estimated June as being around forty-five and Terry fifteen, and had been pretty much on the mark. I asked her when she first started to note things abnormal about him, wondering if his tormented pale face had always been that desolate or whether she always been as hypertensive, speaking as though it were in the middle of a bomb attack with air sirens droning away, never in calm reassuring words, put staccato bursts loaded with hesitancy and anxiety.

"I guess around the time he should have been speaking, I just noticed that he had stopped developing. And I only got glimpses, because Terry was always in a nursery or baby-sitting as I had to be away teaching. In fact it has cost a fortune." At that point I asked her what the long weird-looking instrument was that she had been holding.

"Well he gets so out of hand at times, that I have had to resort to using this. I was terrified that on the airplane he would cause commotion. And you know he's grown almost bigger than I am now, and he's really quite strong. Why, not long ago I was going down the freeway, and he started strangling me and grabbing at the steering-wheel, and I mean he doesn't realize it, but that could have killed both of us. So I figure a few good jolts'll keep him back, he's really quite terrified of this . . ." coming to the point of the question, "Oh, it's an electric cattle prod. Somebody gave it to me, and said it would work. The batteries go in the handle here, and the current is . . . ."

"Yeah I know," I replied, "it runs off a bank of capacitors, and can emit several hundred volts in a fraction of a second . . . ."

June suddenly remembered something. "You know there was an interesting incident connected with Terry's problem. It goes back to when he was a little kid, around the time I first got to the L.A. area, and had to find a house. My new house, it turned out, had belonged to Yoganandas' Spiritual Realization Fellowship, used as a retreat and a monastery, and I heard that Yogananda himself had slept there. At any rate it was suffused with a spiritual feeling. Well one day, a very strange Indian, who I believe had been a sadhu, walked up to my porch. Perhaps he still thought the house belonged to the Yogananda people. He had the strangest eyes I have ever seen in my life, dark and powerful. The next thing I knew, he was holding Terry in his arms, and staring intensely into Terry's eyes. He then gave me a curious look, and said, "The spirit in this body has been a long-time enemy of mine. I have just defeated him," and he handed Terry to me, and left. Within a year or so I began to notice funny things about Terry, like his slowed down loco-motor control, and lack of response to holding."

By the time of the Guru Purnima festival of 19 July 1970 more Americans had arrived, and the older group were shuffled around. June ended up in the luxury suites with Terry, after Baba had arrived and ordered that she be moved from the cubicle next to ours to a suite. In no time the upper porch of the luxury suites was crowded with Americans. June and Terry in one room; Ed, Chris, Kerry, and Janet in another, and soon Kevin and Sally.

After three weeks, with no Baba darshan, Ed was almost about to head back to the cooler air of the Himalayas, and try once again with Maharajji, "I couldn't find him, so now you've gotta be my guru, Maharajji." And later he thanked me that I had persuaded him to stay. June was getting anxious, everybody was getting anxious, especially the "outcaste" who were soon to leave.

Tony and Bob, who had their mats in the same area, and spent most of their time griping. Howard fully disassociated himself from them, and moved to the area of the lower porch with Benno, Hans, Peter, Martin, Zolt, and Bruce. By then I associated more with the contingent on the upper luxury suite across the way.

One reason for this preference was a growing parting of the ways between Bruce and me that had emerged during our daily practice-sessions together with the Bengali, Chowdri Kalyan, formerly the only other male *bhajan*-singer other than Raja Reddy.

Bruce and I had an erratic friendship. When he was up he was great to be around, funny, congenial, creative, insightful, with a certain amount of genteel charm. At other times he would begin to lean towards general perversity, fountaining sick humour. More than likely, that would ignite the theater of the absurd in me, and from then on, it was a downhill slope. By the time I had transformed into an alien being staging a martian invasion, Brue would point the accusing finger and say, "You started it. Man you're not being very spiritual." And then he would suggest that people brought him down, and that if he were only left to himself, he would be as high as the north star. At that point I would let him have it, and bring up countless negative perceptions I had about him.

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And when Bruce was really down, he was almost unapproachable. I gradually began to suspect that he was a psychotic. He would mask an infinitely pained depression by a false lightness, and then blow a fuse. He reminded me of a cranky old woman, and half the time at *bhajans*, he came off as a *prima donna*. I always knew when he was approaching one of these moods because, like a warning whistle, he would launch into some comical routine. One was an imitation of a seance given by some really warped old hag, whose eyes would light up, and who would begin making shrill spirit sounds. Soon after that he would catch himself, and go through endless introspective agonies about spiritually blowing it.

By the end of the three weeks we were practically not on speaking terms, and I refused to sing along with him. We now walked to *bhajans* separately, we sang solo, each sitting on opposite sides of Kalyan. And I was beginning to feel better now that I was ditching him. I had the volume to sing alone, he didn't, because it was a big hall, and had no microphone except at festivals. Not only that, I was gaining more confidence about being able to stay on pitch, and unlike his voice which was as a wispy monotone, I was gradually gaining the ability to do the vocal manoeuvrers of an Indian. A lot of the girls, especially Marsha, were giving me more positive feedback about my growing ability to sing solo.

Yet I knew this disagreement with Bruce was wrong. And the minute Baba returned right before the festival, he called us in private to speak with him. By his very kindness and forgiveness, he convicted us of our sin of being so small-minded. But there was no mistaking that he had been aware of our feud. Rather than sit above us on the chair, he sat with us on the floor of the interview room. He taught us several new songs, sang to us to illustrate technique, told stories, and generally adopted the tone a patient mother dealing with two wayward sons, assuring of his love for us, of our value to him.

For the past few days Baba had stopped giving interviews because it was too near the festival, and already there were many thousands pressing for interviews. Far more than could be seen by Baba. The unexpected act of graciousness of Baba's towards Bruce and me, thrust us into the spotlight before the entire ashram community. We would have felt lucky seeing him in a standard interview with forty other people, and would have felt thrice blest in these pressing days. But for us to have him alone was something hard to account for.

After an hour with him, he patted us on our backs, encouraged us to practice together as a team. He then ordered us to come back the next day at the same time, promising that he would show us more. Baba himself would be our teacher, on the very day before the Guru Purnima festival. Bruce transformed into a repentant sinner who had underestimated Baba, and I felt a new hope rekindled from the recent three-week "dry spell" since late June. Baba was no less conscious of me, dispelling my growing anxiety that maybe we were to be shelved for a long time.

On the following day Baba sang with us, as I felt even more patently undeserving. Since Bruce and I had ironed things out the night before, Baba was noticeably pleased. He told us a story from the *Chandogya Upanishad*, about god being smaller than the smallest grain of mustard seed—that the same *atma* resided in everything. When he concluded that *upaya* meant teaching, I grabbed his feet and lowered my head, and vowed to "surrender to the guru." An apt statement on the eve of the festival throughout India celebrating the guru as god. Baba's eyes dazzled with luminous pleasure. He patted us on the backs on the way out, and mentioned that a surprise was coming our way.

11

Fifteen minutes before the start of the festival, one of the many badged ushers ran up and said that "bhagvan" had reserved a special seat for me. He sprinted, and I followed around the parameter of the crowd. When we got dangerously close to the front, I began to get nervous. For one thing, the audience surged up to the very front steps, and was so packed in the middle that I would need a crane to find maybe a place in fifteen thousand people.

Fifteen feet from his elevated throne, side stage, sat Bruce, Peter, and Gill, with a space for me between Peter and Bruce. When I sat down, the "electronic" devotee with the glasses, immediately set three microphones before us. I looked up, and Baba whispered to me, "singing some *bhajans*."

I looked at Bruce, who smiled as if to say, "there's no end to this thing—nothing seems impossible." As I gazed back at the brilliant chrome of the microphone, I thought, "maybe it was a good thing that I was caught completely off guard. I'm too stunned to be really nervous. I think I could sing, in fact." Baba gave the signal, and whispered, "Govinda Krishna Jai."

Each looked at the other, holding hands up, where we kept time by slapping our crossed legs in rhythm—one, two, three. We started off together, and immediately our voices filled the ashram, sounding not too bad at all. There was safety in numbers, because if one strayed off the rest could stabilize the tune, making the accident seem like a harmony. But there was something else that was going on as well.

I had felt Baba's force many times in interviews, especially so at the private interviews, but the cloak of sheer power that I was feeling now was almost a semi-visible electric aura, resembling the impenetrable force fields in *War of The Worlds*. And it seemed to both electrify and numb me, arching over us in a protective sphere, shielding us from the noise and consciousness of the crowd. In the web of energy, I felt a single-minded concern for just singing songs and nothing else, almost as though I was transforming into a mindless musical instrument, beckoned, guided, and finally played by an entity in the force that was not sheerly mindless. And later I reflected on a simple metaphor of Baba's "Your body must become like Krishna's flute, the senses and ego hollowed inside for the divine hand of god to play."

After about four *bhajans*, each one whispered to us from afar by Baba, he lifted his hand on the final best, and we stopped. As though surfacing from a long scuba dive, the web disappeared as the usual sounds and movements of the outside rushed back, like the crashing waves and spray of the sea-air. I was stunned, but still attentive to what was going on.

Baba began his discourse, after a brief introduction by a high magistrate from Bengal, who was to become a comrade of mine on a future project. Baba's voice filled the ashram for over an hour, rolling on and on like a powerful thunderhead. Though none of us could understand the Telugu being spoken, there were familiar anglicizations dropped that suggested we were being used as examples and models for the Indians. "Perfect *raga*, perfect *tala*, just like Indians . . . American *bhakta* devotion, pure, egoless . . . called from around the world, twelve thousand miles, etc."

I remembered clearly, though it seemed like a dream at the time, a little uproar that had occurred while we were singing. There was a bestial canine howl that pierced the air—it seemed distant then, but now, while Baba was talking, it started coming back clearly. Terry, sitting with June in the women's section, began flailing about, knocking some of the women aside, throwing something, possibly June's purse, and finally just scrambling all over the place with extraordinary energy. Humiliated, and teary-eyed, June had to go through the agonizing ordeal of marching the boy from a place that had she used any foresight, she wouldn't have been in; the absolute sardine packed center of the giant crowd of women. After treading on saris, and stepping on legs, arms, and what not, and bumping into heads, June and Terry broke from the crowd, she clutching his shoulder, as they walked with a fast bouncy gait, reminding me of two giant sandy-haired kangaroos bouncing in military step. From behind she resembled a giant-sized, "Little Orphan Annie". The large cylindrical springy red curls of her wig, possibly a synthetic fibre, bounced up and down in exaggerated quivers. Dr Vijaya Laxmi gave her a cold look of disdain, as Vijaya, the girl *banjan*-singer, leapt to her aid.

The festival continued in tempo, during which we even managed a Baba interview. Now Baba was giving us a second interview. Prominent in the minds of the Americans was getting permission from Baba for a residence permit.

There was only one problem left for India and Marsha. Even if they had Baba's written permission to stay, they had to account for at least half a year spent illegally in India, when they did not have extenuating visas. And they also had to account for the fact that one of them didn't have a passport. When they were in the far north-east of India, perhaps Darjeeling, India was so caught up in the spiritual idea of *vairagya*, or detachment, that she either gave away or sold her passport. These were mere material items then, and it simply did not matter. It was also reported that the passport had found its way into a local museum-exhibit, via the notorious Indian black market. Their next Herculean task was to "explain away" the missing six months, explain away the fact that in the Bombay vicinity they had been declared *persona non grata*, because they were accidentally busted in the company of a hashish smuggler, an American who carried *Chittral*—a powerful Pakistani hash—in empty watchcases, among other things. And it was already established that the Indian government had genius in one area, nit-picking and red tape. If the loss of passports and the other incident were somehow correlated, both of them faced a minimum of being expelled from India, if not legal proceedings.

Baba sat in his chair grinning from ear to ear as I saw something rolled up like a white scroll in his hands. Presumably India and Marsha had been in communication with Baba for the past few days, with Kasturi as the go-between, and Baba knew of their dilemma.

With beneficence and sweetness, Baba announced through Nanda, what he had done. He explained and pleaded India and Marsha's case, giving the details. And he told a heart-rending story of two sincere seekers of truth coming to India alone, and running into one difficulty after another through adverse circumstance. But that Baba was always with them, and had guided them to his physical form. I had a special affection for India and Marsha, in fact, you couldn't help liking them they were so sweet, and I used to think that anyone who didn't like them ought to have his head examined.

Baba then proceeded to read the letter in Telugu as Nanda faithfully translated every word with a luxuriant erudition that put many of "the Americans" to shame. She enunciated every word as though it were a final exam in elocution. In the background were enthusiastic outbursts that sounded like something out of the "Hollywood Hillbillys," ". . . Aw gee Baba, that's incredible." Which it was. It was a white lie to protect them, and a real risk on the part of Baba.

A few lines later, Gill, who had been groaning and squirming around, finally let the steam blow out, interrupting Baba midway in a sentence.

"Baba, that's a lie." It hurt him to say it, and his tone, wounded and bewildered, seemed to say, "Aw, why do you have to make me say this. I don't like it, but I haven't any choice."

Nanda's face twitched, and she was no longer able to speak. No Indian had ever pulled this on Baba, at least around her. It was certainly rough medicine for such gentle sensibilities, and for so aristocratic a constitution. But for less cultured folk, truth was not always like a subtle *hors d'oeure* on a plate, it was something that even coal-miners have to pick at in their own crude unapologizing way. And it almost came like a voice of some mid-west poineer calling the cards, straight and to the point, "but that ain't no spade." It wasn't delivered in delicate metaphor, and distant hints, as an obsequious Earl might speak to Henry VIII.

As keenly as I was now watching for it, and as much as I hated to admit it, Baba appeared to manifest a human reaction when I had anticipated a transcendental leap into divine equanimity as being most logical. The scroll in Baba's hands was shuddering visibly, as Baba wound and unwoud it "nervously." His face seemed to twitch, and although he continued to smile compassionately, there seemed to be a contradictory surge of emotion beneath this.

His voice quavered just a bit as he spoke rapid English.

"Not a lie," Baba replied, a wed that Gill would say such a thing, "Not a lie! Your mistake, your misunderstanding."

"But Baba, the fact is that India and Marsha were not with you in Whitefield all that time they were in Darjeeling, and lost their passports. Couldn't ya have done it another way?"

"Small mind, not understanding. God is everywhere, I am everywhere, I brought them to me, Everywhere is in me, Darjeeling. Whitefield. *Prasanthi Nilayam*, is all with me."

"I know, I know that Baba, but the facts were interfered with. The fact remains that you told a lie . . . . India and Marsha were not with you in Whitefield."

There was so much concentrated energy in the room, that I wondered if we were going to have lightning. I was strangely divided down the middle; I greatly wanted India and Marsha to get through the obstacle course, but Gill had a point, was this the right way? And that particular question had been trying to enter my mind. Yet Baba was being loving and sacrificial, and what he was doing was ultimately good by helping them. And I should after all defend him. Meanwhile there continued in me this ringing fear that we were all treading on a very dangerous ground, that if we challenged him too far, we would, once and for all, turn the tables in his favour, and be cast aside. And that this eventuality was nearer than it looked.

Hovering at some far away antipode of my mind came a discernment just too strange to be true. That unbefitting omniscience, Baba had been caught off guard, that this had hit him suddenly and unexpectedly, almost as if he hadn't seen the lie until it was pointed out, and then perceived the error.

I interrupted Gill absolutely shaking with "caution" signals.

"Hey Gill, you've made your point, now why don't you listen to what he has to say. You know as well as I do that space to him is a joke. They've been waiting for this letter for months, whadya trying to do, deprive them of it.?" My intensity was mounting.

Gill flapped his hands and said, "Aw be quiet, you don't understand what's going on."

As Gill sat in pain, swallowing the pill that he elected to take in full knowledge, Baba extended my remark. "I wrote this letter out of pure love, divine love. Not a lie, sir. My devotees want to stay with me, not break their hearts by leaving." India and Marsha nodded helplessly. "Your misunderstanding, unable to see divine love because of jealousy—you want a letter, so when I give extra grace to make a special letter, you are jealous"

"Now Baba, that isn't so. I'm not jealous . . ." and then trailing off. "I had to say it, and if the situation repeated itself a thousand times over, I'd still do the same thing."

Perhaps sensing that he may have gone too far already, and that he might as well get everything out on the table, that there might never be another chance again, Gill unloaded another gripe that had obviously been eating away at him.

"And Baba . . . what the food in the canteen. You've told us for months that we must eat *satwic food*, pure food without spices. Yet the food you eat is so hot that it burns my mouth to pieces. And the food in the canteen is so hot . . . I mean full of peppers this big . . ."—indicating with his fingers ". . . that it physically torments me to eat it."

Baba explained, "For Indian peoples, there is special nourishment in pepper, source of special energy, vitamins and minerals. You American not understanding. Pepper diet the same, all over India.

"But then Baba, why do you tell us to avoid spicy food or food is *rajasic* or *tamasic*? Isn't it the same for everybody?"

"For Indians, it is all right, but for Americans, it causes wrong desires and wrong thoughts." That ended the subject. Gill continued staring at the floor looking puzzled, as Baba laughed understandingly at his ignorance.

Before closing the interview, Baba said, "Faith is very important for *sadhana*, for spiritual path. Doubts are evils and enemies —doubts come from ego, envy, jealousy, hatred . . . all bad qualities." He looked down at Gill as he said this, and it looked to me like Gill was going to get his biggest test of faith, though I wasn't sure how. I also continued to feel apologetic for Gill's outburst that turned what was to be a sweet grace-filled interview into something so strident that almost nobody could swallow the ill feeling. And though things had blown over, the memory of the jarring attack hadn't blown away one iota, nor the tiny imperfections in Baba's explanations.

Baba shared a final piece of Indian scripture as what he termed, "a faith-building model."

"One day Krishna and Arjuna were taking a walk together. Seeing a bird in the sky, Krishna said, 'There is a dove.'

'Yes, a dove' responded Arjuna.

'No, I think it is an eagle'—'You are right, it is an eagle.'

'Well, now I can see that it really is a crow.'

'Then beyond a doubt,' says Arjuna, 'it is a crow.'

"Then Krishna laughed and chided Arjuna for always agreeing. But Arjuna replied, 'You are the lord, whatever you say it is, it is. For your words are truer than what the eye sees.' "

Baba dismissed us smiling. But I knew that a bubble had been broken, something spoilt, resulting in some kind of irreversible damage. The kinds left quietly, groups going off to themselves and huddling, taking walks on the mountain, and staying to themselves. I felt like the peacemaker, and wanted to talk to Baba with such urgency that my chest physically ached. Meanwhile the lucky five were joyous at the letters, and "mind-blown" over Gill.

Gill heavily paced up and down the ashram all that afternoon, and into the next day, not eating, and probably not sleeping. He seemed to be in a total stalemate, as though arguing over every facet of the affair again and again, and then coming to the same conclusion. That given the same circumstances, he would have done the same thing all over again.

The next day, Baba on a post-festival inspection of the ashram with Mr Jawa, the Joy ice-cream man, passed by Gill, and paid no heed to him. Gill had tried to get Baba's attention, walked near him, but was avoided each time, as though cut away. Baba handed those of us still left, those who had not gone to Bangalore, cups of ice-cream. But he didn't hand one to Gill.

In a climax of pain, Gill finally told Anthony that he was leaving until he settled a lot of things, and might be back in two weeks, two months, or never, but that he had to do it. He gave Kasturi a formal letter to Baba, put away Indra Devi's tent, and started packing.

In the meantime I was feeling such inner agony at the misunderstanding, and such a need for an apology to Baba, that I spent hours sitting on the steps at darshan. Meanwhile more of the others were leaving; Howard, Michelle, Tony, Bruce, India, Marsha, Jnani, to name a few, in order to get their legal status straightened out; they would in fact leave the next morning on the five o'clock bus. They all knew what I was trying to do, and in fact looked to me to do it, perhaps feeling that I had just about the only chance of approaching Baba, and certainly of getting another interview right in a row with the other one, seeing how precious they had become.

When Baba came out at dusk, my feelings had become so strong that I suddenly had faith that he would answer a need which was that one in a thousand where you've been promised, as a son, a special key to the house if you should ever need it; an auxiliary covenant, so to speak.

It was a warning flash used by a sailor who finally does shipwreck. Baba walked over me, I looked up in complete earnestness and said, "I need to see you now, Baba," very quietly. He smiled, patted me on the back, and said, "Go in, very happy."

I really did feel like the faithful son, indeed the favourite son. There were three other people there, all close Indian devotees, but there was no doubt about the fact that the interview was between me and Baba. When Baba asked me in, Eddie and Howard's mouths dropped, as they ran off to tell the others that "Tal made it in."

I immediately went from one of my peak depressions into absolute jubilation. I was still in his good books, and here was my chance to get even closer to Baba and patch up things for the others. And he semed overjoyed at my concern.

Sitting next to him cross-legged on the floor, I held his hand as was the custom in Indian families, though very few Indians had ever done that with Baba. I was so moved by the feeling that I was oblivious to the wide open stares of the Indian devotees, who were taken aback at my intimacy with Baba. None of them would ever have had the guts to grab his hand unless he reached out first.

And then Baba and I explained together, to an older devotee sitting there, the implications of misunderstanding god through lack of faith. It was one of my key moments with Baba, I reflected later, yet I was hardly even conscious of it.

"Baba, great misunderstanding. All the others know it, Baba—only Mr Freedom is confused, the others have great faith in you. Instead of thanking you for those letters, you had this problem, and I am sorry, very sorry. Great lack of appreciation."

Baba imitated Gill, "Too much serious, too much *sadhana* like this, always *tapas,* but no love . . ." suddenly assuming Gill's yogic posture of meditation, with a severe face. "His mind now is very confused, and his faith is very weak. And also jealousy, some jealousy for the letter to the two *gopikas* (term denoting the female adorers of Krishna). I have given him very much, but he always wants more, always asks for more. He is spoilt, that's right, like a spoilt child. He will now learn a very hard lesson—before it was much too easy for him, now it will be hard."

Baba then told the others that I was his "nearest and dearest," and his best American disciple. "Always happy, cheerful, and with much gratitude, not like Mr Freedom, a spoilt child." Then Baba told them something in Telugu about my future with him, and their mouths dropped as they were told not to convey it to me, but merely act as witnesses.

Still holding Baba's hand, I described to the Indians the gulf between the common understanding of Baba that most people had, and his transcendental reality as an avatar, equal to Ram or Krishna.

"Most people see it on this level" motioning with my arms, "but his height is way up here." Baba gleamed, talked a while longer, and then we were let out into the night after being with him an hour and a half.

I broke the news to the others. They were in light spirits again, and much more joyful about leaving for Bangalore on the morning bus. The real mind-blower remained that Gill, of all people, was getting weeded. Kerry and Janet had always "kinda wondered" if this would finally happen.

By ten that night, out of the blue, Gill came up to Anthony and me, and invited us to spend what he hinted might be his last supper, for all time, in Puttaparthi. He was looser than I had ever seen him before, as though a great weight had been taken off his shoulders.

He put his arms on our shoulders, and almost danced as we went out onto the dirt road, and headed for one of the local lit-up tea-shacks. Whether he was retreating into an unreal lightness or not, I wasn't sure. It reminded me of the times at University; when someone busts a course that has meant everything to him, he falls into a real "hang-loose" optimism. Suddenly everything's gonna-be-alright, not that there's a way yet, but it'll happen.

"Do ya know that my son's the cutest little thing in the world?" Gill announced to us and the surroundings. "That's right, he's got so much talent he doesn's know what to do with it. Why I used to take him to the park near Golden Gate bridge, and walk him around . . . you know, around the time they used to have the first be-ins. He was hipper and more 'out-front' than they were . . . ."

"Where's he now, Gill?"

"Oh," suddenly cooling down a bit, "he's living with my wife and daughter somewhere in Marine County. I don't know where, but I reckon he's OK."

By the time we reached the restaurant, Gill had told much of his life story over again—his father shooting his mom, then himself, the funeral, the Marine corps for Gill, confusion and violence, going straight with the insurance company that he started, marriage, psychedelics, his genuine non-drug two week mystical experience . . . then his fall; the mental wards, the divorce . . . and his rising; 'Cut front' communes, hitch-hiking down route one, till he met a guy who was his first true father.

As wes at down at a crude stone table, under a twenty-watt bulb, Gill told us about his surrogate dad, while he ate chapatis, and Anthony and I got hot coffee in crusty little stained glasses.

"This man was one of the few people who ever genuinely cared about me," Gill said gravely. Then lightening up, "Why, the first day I walked into his tree nursery in Marine County looking for a job, he said, 'I've been waiting for you.' He was a giant of a man, six feet six, and all muscle. Used to be a lumber jack. But he knew plants; why, he could make em grow just by talking to 'em. In fact he taught me how to hear plants grow. Have ya ever heard the trees growing in the early morning? That's something ya both gotta experience.

"He was so kind to me. Why some mornings he'd walk up to me and say, 'there'll be no work today, we're going to have fun. Come on, we're going into town.' He'd walk me through the fruit market with his arm on my shoulder. He wasn't afraid, he'd talk so loud the stalls would shudder. 'Now what dya want today?' he'd ask. He taught me how to pick a ripe melon. Say, do any of you know how to pick a ripe melon?" Gill asked Anthony and me like a gleeful Rumplestilskin.

"When it sticks to the bottom of your hand, then ya know it's ready. That's because the sugar begins to leak through the rind."

By the time we left the restaurant, Gill was roaring obscenities, which embarrassed us. We didn't want the local Indians spreading the word on Americans. Besides I wondered if Gill was off limits to me as far as Baba was concerned. Gill was telling us about one of his last experiences in the states before he became a sadhu, the time he was a road member of "the living theater."

"Ya heard about it."—"yep," came my answer.

"Why we used to blow people's minds to pieces. They'd walk in off the streets, uptight, straight as an arrow, full of roles and ego games. And we'd break em down. Living theaters interact with the audience. We had one girl who was so wild she'd. . . . And we had a nigger who'd been in the eighty-second airborne. He was seven feet tall, and his tongue was as thick as raw cow liver. And when he used to talk, why he'd talk jus lik dis, yeah, muva! . . . and their brains would fall out on their laps."

Anthony and I knew that it was time to go. By the time we saw him off at the bus, where he was going to spend the night till it pulled out in the pre-dawn hours, Gill was singing us a song, which sounded like old farmer Oakey—

"Doooooo (low pitched) what chya Doooo (falsetto), Beeee whatd Jya Beee (low again;),

Doooo whatd jya dooo, beee whadjya beee. Do what ya do, and be what ya be (reflective, slog matic),

(Le grand Triumphale) . . . Doooooooo What Chya Dooo (Screaching falsetto) And Beeeeeee Whatd Jya Beeeeeeeeeeee. (full bass)."

We all gave each other "out-front" hugs, said "take care and see ya later," and left. There was no doubt about it, I was concerned about Gill and wanted to see him get it together. I liked him more now than ever before, and was just plain sorry that this had to happen. He said to me, "Now brother, you take care of the others, you're the strong man . . . and I'll see ya sooner if not later."

A week or so later, a lot of the group came back from Bangalore in a rented cab with news that Tony finally freaked out and split, Gill went on to Udipi Taluk to meditate on the beach in a hut, and that Jai was now "more spaced-out" than ever, begging for food, standing on street-corners with grey ash smeared all over his head, and as usual, talking at a hundred decibels about Kundalini yoga and what a power-house Siva Bala Yogi was. On the other side, Jai would pump Michelle for local ashram news, what Baba was doing, what I was now doing. And both of them wrote Hilda for advice, receiving in return, transcendental slogans of supreme loving optimism.

At the ashram, all the way till mid-September, Baba had been gone, leaving us to battle it out with the heat and desolation. I spent most of my time with Eddie, Kerry, and Janet, and continued singing with Bruce, who continued to be fun when he felt well, but whom I had learned to avoid otherwise. I also spent a fair amount of time with Anthony and Victoria, during which at one point, Vickie was ill with sunstroke again, and had to stay in the private suite of Dr Vijaya Laxmi. Meanwhile many of the new people were having their first really painful battles with dysentery, sunstroke, general debilitation, and assorted unknown and miscellaneous diseases. A growing one turned out to be sores and dripping lesions that would form on the arms and legs, get larger and larger, and drip more and more as the days went on.

As time drew near to the coming October festival, Baba continued to shower me with attention. At one point he had me escort him from the Octagonal building down the hill, at another point he had us all painting signs for the ashram on granite slabs. But there was an even greater privilege.

Not only was I seeing Baba, and not only as the sole American, but I was seeing him in his private residence at night in the busy season right before the festival when literally nobody but Baba's absolute inner circle could get near him—and that boiled down to few people apart from Raja Reddy, Kasturi, the temple priest, Suraya, 'Adonis', and a couple of others.

As the boy remained at the door, I went through the empty interview room, flung the purple velvet drapes of the private interview hallway aside, like a prince in his father's palace, and dashed up the narrow green cement stair-well; the border of which, for ten months of darshans outside the hall, had been a center point of absolute mystery and gnawing curiosity for me. Indeed I was heading to the very room that was Baba's bedroom-lounge, out of which he stepped like a morning sun in the early hour *darshans* at sunrise. The same room that he spent most of his time in, during the day and night, and the room that he invariably left to give darshans from the connecting upstairs verandah, on his way to its mirror image room, his dining room, across the front verandah.

When I reached the next floor, I saw a dark room to the right, and a brilliant doorway to the left. I walked up to it, and was almost overpowered from the force inside, as an almost blinding red leapt up at me from the thick rug on the floor, the silk pillows about the room, the fiery red counterpane on Baba's huge oval bed, where Baba sat wearing a bright red silk-robe. "You're late, needed entire boy's school and Seva Dal to find one single Rowdie," came the voice from beneath the seven-hooded serpent. At last there was Baba's "mythical" bed about which every rumour spread. Yes, Baba did sleep beneath a seven-hooded serpent (whose Puranic name is Seshma) in the form of a large bed-stead arching over like a beach-umbrella. With seven hoods fusing into one trunk, inlaid red eyes, and forked tongues, it was carved out of precious inlaid-teak and plated with gold leaf. The bed below resembled a wide open lotus pad. Standing against the wall like sentries were Suraiya, the temple priest, the Sastric principal of the Veda school, and crouching on the floor across from Baba was Raja Reddy.

Baba's bed was covered with things, among them, stacks and stacks of women's saris. "See. These saris will go to American gopikas, one each to a girl. Swami has specially selected sari for each girl individually. Tell them." "Sure Baba." Raja Reddy explained to me in impeccable English the nature of the gifts, as Baba made humourous remarks, causing the wall-flowers to laugh. When Kasturi ambled in, he became the center of Baba's humourous assault, as several Telugu alliterations hit the air, and Kasturi made his usual gesture of obeisant ignorance. Kasturi immediately fell in line with the others, at ease, with hands behind their back.

Kasturi, a bald man in his seventies, and one of Baba's elite of intellectuals, always reminded me of a composite of the three monkeys (hear no evil . . .) when he played the fool. He'd flap his hands and plead ignorance only to get another battery of derogatory remarks from Baba. It was the same Mutt and Jeff routine that I had seen between Kasturi and Baba, while we had been painting the granite-signs. He would come by with messages, and Baba would point to his temple with a finger and say, "Weak mind, weak mind."

Perhaps careful not to overindulge me, Baba stuck to the issue, and didn't keep me there for longer than half an hour. My mind, trying to race above the disjointing excitement, attempted to recover something invariably difficult for me to remember, the names of all the girls. Baba and I must have gone back and forth through the stack three times, as he finally wrote down certain names on paper and attached them to specific saris. I would remember a name, and Baba would give me a description—then finally we would agree. All the saris were of high quality material, mostly silk while each varied in colour and design.

Baba spoke to the others as they nodded down approvingly at me, while Raja Reddy and I exchanged comments on what ideal and thoughtful gifts these were. Invariably, Raja was the paragon of virtue that Baba had brought him up to be over the past fifteen years, since, in his early 20's, he had finished schooling in economics at the University of Madras, and just met Baba. A prime specimen of manhood and nobility, Raja was an Indian prince, the son of a wealthy Andhra Pradesh family owning a large confection industry. Here he was the most envied man of all the Baba devotees throughout India, and he spoke to me with the zeal, interest, and cheerfulness as if he were the lucky one to be speaking with me. Raja was always like this, and that was one of the many things about him that awed me—his refinement, polish, and superiority in so many areas. Yet he always retained an aura of mystery because as exuberant as he was, he was always brief.

Moments later, as I was examining Baba's bed and the general layout of the room, in short glances away from Baba, Baba made a stack of saris on my outstretched hands, playfully stacking one after another, and calling out the name. At the end he gave me a big pat on the back, and told me to go.

Five minutes later, shaking like a leaf from the experience, I was in the center of the girl's room handing out saris to the whole lot of them.

The afternoon of the next day, around October, Kasturi came up to me matter of factly, and said, "Oh, by the way, be ready to give a speech to the All India Sathya Sai Seva Dal and Seva Samithi in front of Baba in the main prayer-hall on 3 October. Baba wants you to address the assembly."

"How many members are there?"

"Oh, I would say at least 1,500-2,000. And since the Seva Dal is nation-wide, in all the big cities, most of the members are prominent citizens, doctors, lawyers, engineers, and the like."

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The sky, a silver grey from the Andhra monsoon season, and armadas of buses just beginning to pull in at the beginning of October, I had been well warned that the coming Dashara or Navaratri festival was similar in magnitude to the Mahasivaratri festival, only it would last two weeks instead of three days. Pilgrims were claiming patches of ground, and I knew that soon enough, the side compound in front of our new quarters would be a field of human bodies. As much excitement, novelty, and energy as there was at these festivals, we all partially dreaded the ordeal of managing the essentials of living in the ensuing chaos: the ashram canteen would run in super-shifts, long lines of badged volunteers ladling out tons of rice to thousands, production line feedings of potboiler hot rice, bone white and practically devoid of protein, but for traces of lentils. The canteen staff would be worked down to the bone, and we would have to start missing meals if things became too overcrowded. The latrine situation around the neighbouring hills would be another problem, one of logistics as well as hygiene. Last of all, there was the problem of finding sleep in all the noise and confusion which would only cease from midnight to four in the morning. The males were lucky to have the room. We could all fit inside snugly, and that was a partial escape from the overcrowding. The girls couldn't quite fit into their old room, still in the row of cubicles facing the luxury suites. By now there was too many of them and the room was just too small. They retained the space on the long porch, but just barely. Pilgrims and cubicle-owners were beginning to line up their bedding an Indian third-class box car, on the rest of the porch.

Some of the girls, headed by India and Marsha, volunteered to get a food line going so that most of the foreigners might avoid the canteen. They would cook enough for fifteen of us on kerosene-burners in their small cubicle. by now, there were twenty-eight of us all together. The latest arrival being an American Negress in her late 20s.

I first noticed her in the makeshift dining shed as different groups of us congregated on various mounds of burlap sacks. I heard this articulate voice expound authoritatively on mathematical mysticism, Buckminister Fuller, Gurdjief, Steve Gaskin, and the occult science of Tarrot· Bright and hip, she had been a graduate student in microbiology at Oberlin· Then she went to "Frisco," realizing that the academic scene was just a trip. She met everybody who was anybody, lived in a teepee, went macrobiotice, got married, went to Mount Shasta, and finally taught Tarot at the "Six Day School" founded by her husband Phil, who taught astrology. Right now he was in Bombay with the two kids. They had come to India, among other things, so he could study *tabla*, under one of India's top musicians. But the world was that Baba was the answer. And she was going to tell him as soon as possible. In a few weeks they would both return with everything.

Before the pre-festival Conference of the All India Sathya Seva Dal, which would not include the general public, it was evident that one of the devotees, a General in the Indian Army, had brought a small division of troops, now encamped on the outskirts of the ashram. Among other things, they were spraying the area with DDT. They had also helped install a large pump on the second largest well on the ashram, near the canteen. Large hoses now ran into the kitchen area. Presumably, the army was also intrumental in collecting the thirty or so local stray dogs—already a constant menace of howls near she kitchen area—they packed them in the back of a flimsy open-ended truck, and drove them thirty miles off into the hills. Bruce, Peter, and a few others huddled nearby, communicating, by glares, that if the cargo was in any way damaged, there would be a psychic war.

That afternoon, word soon spread that Baba had called a meeting for the ashram residents. Not ten minutes into the family gathering, we had glimpse of Baba as the wrathful father. He was chiding a number of key rumour-mongers, old women who had feuds of jealousy for decades, each claiming to be more authentic a devotee than the others. Now the subject matter of their vindictive little notes to Baba had switched to lambasting the most recent additions to the fold, the American women *gopikas*. They were seen "flirting with men," or wearing their saris improperly, or talking too much, or behaving improperly at the well. To their shame, Baba repeated much of the content of their notes to him, telling the Indian women that if he had to read any more of these sordid notes, indications of their own depleted spirituality, they would be told once and for all to vacate the ashram for good. Except for a few pained exclamations, a fearful silence gripped the residents.

Baba pointed a stabbing question to one of the Veda school teachers. There was a whining reply. Baba shouted something back to him. He slowly rose to his feet, trembling, speaking pleadingly, hands clasped, and wringing. Baba seemed to bring him to tears, then adeptly forgave him. He sank back down relieved. Now Baba was chiding another school official.

Baba addressed all of his children. Head sank in shame. They must become beacons to all the visitors and pilgrims of the festival, and to the world in general. They must be becoming of him, and of their true natures. The storm was over, and repentant nods came from the audience.

Baba's tone was consoling. Then he taught. And finally his dam of bliss broke froth again, never to be held back long, as he laughed and mimed, and made light of their darkness. As he jibed with different individuals, Bruce's hand went up over by Baba's side door.

"Yes?"

Bruce had been squirming in pain. "Baba, I have to go."

"Yes. I understand. Go."

Bruce trotted off to the hill, I surmised, to relieve himself. The *vibhuti* that Baba had materialized a few days before for Bruce had not yet taken effect on either the diarrhoea or migraine headaches that Bruce had been complaining of.

The next meeting in the hall, now that the ashram residents had been taken care of, included the "Americans" again as well as a good thousand whose background contrasted sharply with those of the local rasidents. These were the middle and upper class city dwellers of India—the political-industrial entity. They looked healthier, had lighter skins, were better dressed, were conversant in two or three languages, and seemed far more charged over the mystery and novelty of Baba. This was the beginning of the three-day conference of the India-wide "Satya Seva Dal." During the coming Dashara festival, only a few days away, the Seva Dal members would do all sort of volunteer work to keep the gears of the festival moving freely.

On our way in, Kasturi handed us the same aluminium badges that the Seva Dal were wearing. Three inches square, they had large black photo impressions of Baba printed in the centre with Baba maxims beneath.

Kasturi and Baba gave orientation addresses so that the badge-wearers would live up to their boon, and worthily shine forth the holiness of Baba by their conduct before the watching world.

Baba repeated the gist of similar speaches, published over years past. "The best way to please Me is to see Me in all beings, and serve them just as you would like to serve Me. That is the best form of worship which will reach Me. The Lord may have two hundred vows or two vows; that is his will. But the bhakta need have only one vow to save himself, the vow of total surrender, of *sarangathi*. If you have full faith in the divinity of every being, the attitude of surrender will automatically be fixed in you."

"And you need know the answers to two problems only; who is Baba? Who am I? And the answer is, 'I am reflected image of Baba. Baba is the original of which I am the reflection.' That is the relationship whether the image is distorted or correct."

"*Ajna*, command, is all-important. When I ask you to do a thing, it must be instantly and willingly obeyed. You can say good-bye to *dhyanam* or *japam* (meditative techniques), it does not matter. The fruit of obedience is more valuable than those disciplines."

That evening I bumped into Kasturi in front of his porch, and he reaffirmed that I was to speak before the Seva Dal, probably the afternaon of the next day. Bruce tried again to get a definite answer on whether he too would be required to speak, since

Kasturi had hinted as much. A perfectionist, he had to know definitely in order to have sufficient time to prepare a speech. He didn't want to go up "cold turkey," and botch it. Kasturi's reply relieved him of the onus. "No, only Tal would speak," had come down the grapevine from Baba's command tower.

When we entered the hall at eight a.m. the next day, and were handed the agenda, everything was according to the schedule. I was the only one of the Americans listed to speak, and my talk would follow the address of the chief guest, the Governer of Goa, in the afternoon session, after which would follow the "Divine message to delegates by Bhagvan Sri Satya Sai Baba."

However after about three hours, there was a sudden change. Packed at the very front of the hall, next to Kasturi and Raja Reddy, Kasturi leaned over and whispered in my ear, "You are next, Baba says you talk now, not this afternoon." I looked at Baba and he nodded. Then Kasturi told Bruce, and I heard a low groan. I gave Baba an answering nod that I was ready. Then he called me over to where he sat by the side of the stage, and said, "Change of plans. Ready now? Talk fifteen minutes. Bruce is ready?"

I came closer to Baba, looked dubiously over in Bruce's direction, with the audience at my back." I'm not sure Baba. Some confusion with Kasturi. Bruce is not really prepared, Baba."

"Preparation not necessary, when the heart is mine."

"I know Baba but . . . ."

I sat down, and started scratching down an outline on one of the spare agendas. Bruce was before Baba, pleading. Looking for a connecting theme, I decided to listen to some of the interminable ramblings of the different representatives up front giving accounts of the Seva Dal activities in their own particular regions. Perhaps I could find a common ground of analogy for international brotherhood and goodwill.

But there was little, as each professional tried to outdo the other in pedantry, in sheer red-tape and irrelevant details, in hamming around for as much personal recognition from Baba as he could muster. This was each man's hour of greatness, and Baba shifted his head from hand to hand, as the representatives strained and rambled under the spotlight. One man had brought, twenty typewritten pages that shook in his hands as he strained to read them. Baba finally said, "*Bas, bas.*" And papers spasmodically shifted as drops of sweat hit them. The conclusion wavered, "In that instant, therefore, it has more or less been decided that a certain non-specified allocation . . . ."

There was a temporary break on the floor, and the delegates were given an opportunity to voice constructive motions regarding new activities to proselytize to the world at large. At the microphone, moderating was Indulah Shah of Bombay, the elected head of the India-wide delegates. A clear-eyed mousy type with glasses, he kept an air of constant ingratiating obeisance to Baba combined with an almost superior air of disdain towards the rest of the delegates. A very rich and influential man, one of his occupations was as head of the Ministry of Communications and Transport for the city of Bombay. Consequently, when Baba needed the city stadium for rallies, as the prime mover behind Indulah Shah, his divine force found very little obstacle getting it.

Finally a motion hit the floor that taxed credibility so much that it had to be repeated. Indulah Shah smiled apologetically towards Baba as a slow outrage mounted within me. The motion put to the floor by a gesticulating, shuttering, winking little man in the back of the hall, who talked at top volume, perhaps to counter his stage-fright, was that Baba devotees all over India should have detachments whose jobs would be to act as sentries at bus stops, to assist all people getting on and off buses. And during the rainy season they should stand there with umbrellas, forever ready, as public servants to shelter those disembarking from the sudden harsh traumas of rain.

At the end of the pandemonium, Kasturi gave a little introduction, and I walked to the microphone. I was more confident than ever, seeing the standard of performance that had already been set, and fully appreciating that my access and closeness to Baba outweighed everybody's, but a handful present. I felt Baba's full support. Plus a haze of energy around me, like the one I had felt when I had first sung in public during the last festival, but milder.

People sat up in interest. The gears of my mind worked even more smoothly speaking in metaphor, ad lib comparisons, and weaving into the texture of the speech and esoteric predictions from the *Agni Puranana*, combined with the traditional tenets of *Vedanta*.

Baba had walked halfway back into the hall, and looked at the rest of the audience, leaning against the wall. He was smiling from time to time with enthusiasm.

A safety mechanism told me that there was enough evidence out there to fry me alive with pride, and completely invalidate my spiritual walk. I tried to forget myself, and concentrate on the issues at stake.

I criticized the attitude of small-mindedness in the delegates that had laid the seeds for some of the motions on the floor. They did not do justice to the God-man and avatar of the age, Sai Baba. What we needed was an overview; a look at the contemporary world on the eve of technological catastrophe. A world of smug athiests and god denying materialists, who had worked themselves not into a utopia, but an impasse.

"Let me give you a concrete example that reflects the irony and absurdity of what I am talking about. Namely, the dangers of technological power founded on philosophical ignorance. When America sent the Apollo Spacecraft, a very complicated technological wonder of microcircuitry, and advanced physics and chemistry, all the way to the moon . . . the citizenry had forfeited their natural right to even see the moon by our previously interfering with nature. For the sky had been so polluted from chemicals and intoxicants, literally hundreds of miles of the sky covering the entire Atlantic seaboard ranging from Boston to beyond Washington, D.C., that the moon was not visible to the naked eye. A dense blanket of yellow green hydrocarbons blotted it out."

Some of the audience nodded full-heartedly with my attack on the materialistic myopia of America. "Just think of the penalty we paid, after all this effort and hundreds of crores of rupees . . . we could not even see the moon. So the citizenry were forced to submerge into their technology, and rely on a device known as a television set in order to see the moon . . . made invisible to us in the first place because of that very technology. We had blundered short-sightedly."

If the volcano of civilization was about to be ignited by the technological time-bomb, it was because people in America had given up their search for truth, and were living the lie. Eyes silently applauded my insight.

"If we are to examine the dilemma of man, beyond whether or not his society is or is not grounded in *dharmic truth*, we go to the fact that surrounding each individual are concentric circles of falsehood of increasing subtlety.

"As we conquer these rings of falsehood, going from the gross exterior to the most basic and innate . . . we arrive at the last falsehood, namely, the falsehood of the ego, *ahamkara*. This is the final band that separates us from god.

"As we work through these concentric circles . . . we begin to approach the truth when we suspect that all is one. Like Adam and Eve we must hold hands and untie the Gordian knot by walking backwards beyond the seduction of sensuality, through the portal into the ocean of light.

"We become the truth when there is only that, the one . . . namo namaste."

I stepped away from the microphone and walked back to my place. The faces of the audience were stunned with the quiet power of the moment. Breaths held in inspired conviction. Bruce made a token speech as some of the ions settled. And then, the Governor of Goa, Nakul Sen had been upstaged, and he knew it. Not by a learned Indian but by a bearded American, and that made it all the more humiliating He had to fend for the honour of Bharat by thwarting this danger of having some western quasi-hippy college graduate outdo a thousand educated upper class delegates: doctors, lawyers, engineers, architects industrial magnates, and yes, governors too. Baba was still smiling. This meant the gem performance of twenty years of international political dilettantery combined with the exquisite poetics of Rabindranath Tagore.

The chief guest speaker, as he was billed, waxed long in his oratory, as much of the audience settled into a slump. Everybody was now waiting for Baba to make the formal inauguration, and bestow his divine blessings.

Baba's talk, as usual, stirred everybody up. Loud and powerful, Baba took obvious command, giving a flawless speech. He was stern, enigmatic, kind, jocular, childish, sweet, all-powerful, and exuding effection. We felt doubly grateful for the privilege of being in his presence.

We stood up while Baba left out of the side door, walking right by Kasturi, Raja Reddy, Bruce, and me. He stopped in front of me with a dazzling smile, poked me in the stomach affectionately, and said "Very good. Very very good. I'm very proud." Bruce he ignored all together. Soon I would be well known by many, as I became, almost overnight, a disciple of great promise in the public eye. My desire to be the American counterpart of Raja Reddy seemed to be materializing.

That evening Kasturi approached me and congratulated me again, informing that a copy of my talk was to appear in the next month's ashram publication, *Sanathana Sarathi*. It would come out just in time for the 23 November birthday festival, and would take up most of the magazine, twenty pages of centre spread with articles by Baba accompanying it as well as poetic utterances and anecdotes by Hilda Charlton, Indra Devi, Ed, and Swami Abhedananda. From then on I would be a usual fixture in the press building with my portable typewriter, not surprisingly, using the Editor's desk, as slow hints continued to issue from Kasturi, the Editor of the Ashram magazine, that he and I would combine forces soon for an international magazine to be published at the large press of Bombay.

When the festival officially got under way, all activities switched from the prayer-hall now only used for meditation, to the giant open shed adjacent to the one where we had painted the signs. The stage was decorated with murals, Baba's throne, standing microphones, curtains, flower garlands, and conference tables when guest speakers were present to accompany Baba. Speakers were wired all over the ashram to suit the bulk of the forty thousand pilgrims who could not fit into the giant shed. Again the "Americans" were included in the roped-off VIP area in the front fifteen rows of the shed-auditorium.

Inaugurating the festival was an even larger parade than the one at the Mahasivaratri festival. Covering all available land was an ocean of heads, neatly roped-off from the various festooned and flower decorated walkways.

All heads were now turned to Baba's private doorway. Baba emerged and signalled me. All Americans were to be in the parade. The assembly of participants encircling Baba's hall began to form columns. Powerful Karnatic horns and drums screamed through the air. The hundred or so Veda school-lads marched ahead in tunics chanting slokas in Sanskrit. In front of them were the boys in the band from the Whitefield Academy. In brand new band uniforms, fifes, drums, tubas, bassoons, trumpets, and cymbals, they headed the parade starting off with one of their best songs, "Bicycle Built For Two." Between the Americans and the Veda School boys, was Gita in an armour of shimmering mirrors, flowers, and chalk designs all over her body, resembling a Maharajah's elephant in the *Ramayana*. Behind us were some of the hospital staff. And a good distance behind them walked Baba with Raja Reddy holding the Puranic metal sun umbrella, Kasturi next to Raja, then Nakul Sen, the Governor of Goa, and then lines of pandits and shastris, Dr Bhagavantam, some of the heads of the All India Sathya Seva Dal, and then the principal and teachers of the Veda School, all sanyassins with shaved heads and tunics, also chanting different Sanskrit slokas.

I looked over to Bruce, who was leading the American contingent with me. He looked like an altar boy who was trying not to smirk. Somehow this wasn't his vision of how it should all happen. Maybe it was Gita, or "Bicycle Built For Two," but an absurd, troubled laugh of irony escaped him. As we approached the side entrance of the auditorium, he managed to muster a dignified expression on his face. Gita was parked by the side entrance along with the boys in the band. Bruce and I went right down the aisle as thousands looked up. The badged volunteers would not allow any other American to come through the side entrance. We prayed quietly that none of the audience would make any obeisant gestures towards us; that would be riding a little too much on Baba's glory. On the very front row we took our seats in front of the microphones with the rest of the men *bhajan*-singers, most of them from the big cities and skilled amateurs. The rest of the Americans awkwardly ambled in by the respective men's and women's VIP entrances.

The parade set the tenor for the nine-day festival. A tight full day programme for each of the nine days, the public assembled in the huge shed-auditorium twice a day. In the mornings from eight to eleven-thirty or twelve, and again in the afternoons from four to seven, eight, and even nine in the evening, especially when there were plays or musical recitals.

For full seven days, from dawn to dusk, the famous Mantap took place on the stage of the auditorium. Without break, this was the high priestly adoration of Vedapurusha, involving a handful of relatively well known Vedic scholars across the land who had come especially for the honour of being able to participate in the sacred *yajna*, or rite of worship. A background chorus, so to speak, was comprised of lesser sastris, the Veda school-boys, and several instructors. The principal of the Veda school, a man who resembled a tiny Tolkeinien gnome with an almost piercing glint in his eyes, took full part in the yajna, reciting one entire Veda after another by heart. The Veda sastris were in full ceremonial attire of gauze dhotis, bare-chested, except for a scarlet tunic and the sacred Brahmin thread. Most of their bodies were smeared with ash.

Anyone doing what they did in the West would have been institutionalized. To the ignorant observer these great men of letters appeared to be babbling with exaggerated mouth-movements, each in a self-styled sandbox or play area, while making what looked like mud-pies or tar-babies by the thousands. A little lingam would be rolled vigorously on a rock board, bowed to, decorated, babbled to, worshipped, held up on the air, and then rolled into the mass of clay to be remade again. Again and again.

In a less than reverent attitude, Bruce had managed to simulate this out on the mountain.

Kasturi in his *magnum opus* on Baba, *Satyam Sivam Sundaram*, shared the deeper things of god behind this apparent buffoonery. "The fire is adored as sacred, for it ignites and illumines; it destroys and purifies: it burns and burnishes; it spreads and shines. It moves fast from one victim to another. So it is praised and fed hymns of praise. The sun is the giver of life, and energy; it nips a day off from our allotted span of life, with every sunset; so, it is worshipped by continuous prostration, repeating each time, hymns of extolment. Others can visualize god in the expansive Banyan tree, timeless, self-propelling . . . thus, hymns are uttered to the spirit of trees, as incorporated in the Vadapurusha."

One way to deal with the mantap was to consider it a nifty anthropological side-show. But one thing about it did manage to capture my imagination, the fascinating sing-songy melodies in the early morning mass utterances of everybody involved on stage. They would come over the loudspeakers all over the ashram, and build up to energized peaks. But not Bruce, he found stumbling block after stumbling block, and was falling away rapidly.

Not only had he been hard put about last minute changes of his speech, but he needed another note from Baba to get a year's residence permit. Back in the summer he had been given a six month's residence permit, but that was already running out of the festival, and he was getting worried. I told him to keep the faith, but he only got more singleminded about it. He was afraid his time would run out, that Baba would not give him another note. And then I too began to wonder whether things were closing in on him due to his falling away of faith.

As Bruce and I were talking in front of Baba's garage, attached to the rear of our new quarters, we were wondering how, if Baba never accepted donations as he so often said in his speeches, he could have a brand new air-conditioned Lincoln limousine station-wagon with tinted windows. It was shimmering from the brand new shine and wax as was Baba's Fiat and land-rover. Impressive cars for even the wealthiest Indians, out here they were doubly so. Just then Kasturi came to Bruce with the news he had been waiting for. Was Baba going to grant the letter or not? Anguish clouded Bruce's face, he moaned in incredulity, then walked off sulkingly when Kasturi had to coldly play the axe-man. "Baba says you're on your own resources. If your faith is sufficient, then I am sure the Mysore Police will grant the residence permit." If Kasturi had been more like a relative or a friend of Bruce's before, now he was distant, the school teacher handing out the "F."

Bruce's mood, occasionally buoyant, stayad on the downward path throughout the festival.

Kasturi came into the male quarters one evening at the beginning of the festival, and explained what it was all about; "This festival celebrates Baba as the divine mother aspect of god." Which especially appealed to the girls, who found that aspect easier to adore and identify with.

"Dashara celebrates *shakti* or power, as victor. For the first three days Mahakali or Durga is extolled. She is the facet of power, worshipped mostly in Bengal. Ramakrishna adored Kali. You know Tal."

"Yes."

"She can be frightening; anger, vengeance, adventure, and destruction. This is the *tamasic* aspect of the *triguna* nature.

"The second three days adores the divine mother as the energy of provision, Mahalakshmi. Here you have the *rajasic* nature of power—wealth, authority, imperium, prosperity. In Punjab they worship her to bestow the boons of wealth.

"The last three days are devoted to worshipping the divine mother in her Higher or satwic aspect, as Mahasaraswati. Here you see divine energy in its highest sublimations—self-control, vision, value, knowledge, virtue, purity, justice, and equanimity."

Like a 70-year old Missouri farmer who starts to get the rhythm in his feet after hearing the first riffs of a ukelele at the local square dance, Kasturi's eyes lit up in reminiscence. "In the old days, around 1950, when I first stayed with Baba, the crowds were sufficiently small, and Baba enough like a relative to permit us to adore him personally as the divine mother. Sometimes he would appear wrapped up in sari and bangles." I recalled the faded pictures at the old mandir. "The women put sandal paste on his feet, and the men would carry him about the villages in a palanquin. Baba became the divine mother for all to behold. Sometimes devotees would see the very goddess they were worshipping transfigured on his divine features.

Baba would just smile at them knowingly."

As Kasturi left, Suraiya ambled in with a large basketful of golf-ball sized sweets known as *ladoo*. They had come to us night after night as gifts from Baba. Devotees from Bombay would bring them to Baba, and they would immediately rebound over to us. "Prasad from Baba," Suraiya muttered and left.

13

On the way to get something to eat that evening Ed, Kerry, Janet, and I felt a light drizzle. We decided to have a late snack outside at one of the lit-up restaurants. A carnivalesque feeling pervaded the streets, as though another type of festival was going on independent of the festivities of the ashram. On the way back, sure enough, gongs and heavy drum beats pursued us down the deeply worn mud road. We loitered by the side gate as it passed. A small procession of peasants who resembled gypsies, carrying torches, and wearing nose-rings and turbans, carried a large platform on their shoulders. On it was a miniature altar and a rather sinister-looking god that glared out into the disappearing road ahead. The procession looked defiantly at the gate and went on. A local Indian told us that we would be surprised to know how many of the peasants in this locality of Andhra Pradesh were involved in magic, occult arts, and dark ceremonies. "They are going to perform a sacrifice out on the mountains somewhere. Who knows where?" He walked off into the crowded road.

The next night, Bruce, Peter, Ed, and I saw a local merchant who looked familiar, but whom we could not quite place. As the ringleader, he chanted with a stern harshness to a whole road-show of frightened looking children, costumed and frenetically dancing around. Again it was at the side gate. The wealthier Indian pilgrims strolling out of the ashram pitched in five paisa bits on to a mat lying in the center of the open arena of dancing kids. It reminded me of the same malevolence that I saw in Calcutta where the beggar clans butcher their children so that they can pull in more alms on the streets. Working ourselves to the inward barrier of the ring, Ed and I stood for a while, and glared at the ringleader, and wondered why Baba didn't just blow him away. Five minutes later, I caught myself doing a familiar head-trip; waiting for an injustice so that you can step in and pick a fight. The ringleader was unaffected, but some of his henchman holding back the crowd started looking mean. We glared even harder. After a while the henchmen started getting nervous, and Ed and I left. Bruce, Kerry, and Janet had already walked on.

"Somethin ain't right man." I agreed with Ed, but had no immediate answers other than, "It's just a miniature theatre of the whole world. You can have the greatest light around, and still have people right beside it who either can't see it or don't want to see it." The ringleader turned out to be the local photographer whose office was near the sidegate in a seedy upstairs room.

June spewed out the latest report. "And he's beginning to make a few word sounds. The doctor said a number of times . . . oh boy they had problems with him at first, but Terry made friends with an orderly . . . at any rate, the doctor said a number of times that Terry was able to form several actual words. He's also less anti-social. When Baba sent him away he told me and the doctor not to worry, that Terry was in his hands, and that the atmosphere of the clinic was the best place for Baba to work on him from afar. He told the doctor a number of special things to do and then to look for improvement with faith."

We all stood there, and tried to work up a great faith in Terry's healing. That was the secret. As Christ had said, "Thy faith hath made the whole." In front of the Nazarene, even lepers became unblemished before entire crowd of onlookers. It was instantaneous. As was the instantaneous healing of the mentally tormented, deranged, and demon-possessed. Christ would utter a single word, and it was done.

Throughout the whole festival, we spent a continuum of seventy-two hours in the big shed-auditorium. Broken up into nine days, two periods a day, it kept me constantly on edge with interest. There were plays, musical recitals, dances, philosophical discourses by well known scholars and yogis, as well as long daily addresses by Baba. Though Baba's talks were in Telugu, Kasturi was now in the habit of standing at an adjacent microphone and, after each pause, translating whatever Baba said into English. This saved us from feeling out of the picture, and forever wondering what the content of Baba's flood of sentences was.

On another day Baba looked down at me from the stage, and said, "foreigners ready?" The next thing I knew, he was beckoning all twenty-eight of us up on the stage before thousands of onlookers. Raja Reddy passed up a harmonium to Bruce, and Baba had microphones adjusted for Bruce and me who sat leading the others, in the center front of the stage. Babe walked down where we had sat in the audience, and signalled us to start. Bruce, taking it all in with a forced philosophical calm, turned with the usual ready signal, and said, "quick, what song?"

"Nataraja."

He hummed so that we could find our key, and off we went before the ten thousand, harmonium and voices surging across the speakers all over the ashram. Baba sat smiling, and I was satisfied that it was up to standard. Now I understood why Baba had all of us fitted in the ceremonial garb.

But Bruce's mood underneath had not been appeased. It had all come.

At one of the events Baba asked me where Bruce was. He was annoyed. Several hours later, outside the men's quarters, Ed and I saw Bruce come down the hill. As he approached he did little dance steps and jigs. Bruce's rich repertoire of routines I had learned to read as warning signs of hysteria and depression.

Resembling a crosscut between Vincent Price and Donald Sutherland, eyes swollen like poached eggs, Bruce, at the twenty-foot mark did an imitation of the chorus line kicks of the Rockettes at Radio City music Hall, Times Square. His Lawrence Welk" Da-dee-dee-do-" version of "Mississippi Mud," mutated, behind a brief perverse grin, into a spontaneous nasal falsetto warble of "Do Whad ya Do, Be whad jcha Be." That ended at the four-foot mark, and Bruce oscillated between mock guffaws and flickerings of indignation and anguish.

A modulated mock-hysterical scream from "The Haunted House on Skull Mountain." "You wouldn't believe what just happened. It's the final straw . . . it's."

To the tune of Ok-what-is-it-this-time, Ed and I put in our cue, "what happened?"

A groan of cosmic betrayal. Flustering, Bruce told us how he had been in the men's quarters, suddenly experiencing the familiar hypodermic-needle-in-the-abdomen pains of dysentery. Without a moment to waste, he gritted his teeth, held it in, and ran up the hillside barefooted fighting time bitterly. We all knew what he was up against. Before he could totally disappear from public view on the hilltop, the pains were like skewers. In a steep, jagged pocket of boulders, nettles, and thorns, he defecated, losing his balance halfway through, rolling down some fifteen feet over his own excrement, sharp edges, and thorns. It was too much. Rage against Baba. Why was crucifixion unavoidable on the path to enlightenment? Bruce held out his arms as though on a cross.

Ed and I tried to get at the root of the problem at the side gate talking to Bruce for several hours. He was experiencing a lapse of faith, and his downspiral had to be circumvented before he spiritually blew it. The whole thing could be an unnecessary head-trip of Bruce's to satisfy some preconceived quota of suffering.

"You're gonna do penance anyway, you don't need to invent it."

Bruce's problems were far too complex for either Ed or I to verbalize. It was a private maze going back centuries. And though we were all brothers, we were also passing strangers on a road, at times going into neither worlds. And though occasionally we could each extend an arm, we were truly alone when it came to working our way out of the maze in the final sense. We were all one, yes, but nobody could walk our particular tortuous path but ourselves. As Raja had told Bruce and me, it was the most sublime and subtle surgery to cut the roots of the ego from all the projected phenomenal universe; one had to implicitly obey the inner voice of the *atma*, or its concretization, the master. Ed and I knew that Bruce had to resolve his problems through Baba, persevere with the guiding inner light, or sink.

But Bruce's root problem was a faltering faith in his own spiritual guidance system. In himself, in Baba, and even the guiding inner light. He needed someone he could trust to meet his perfect standards. Too many contradictions about the festival had fallen short of those standards. Could he really throw his soul on Baba?

Starting at the crack of dawn the next day, the festival practically over, came a constant waterfall of human movement. I peered through the screen, and saw that some of the Seva Dal, at least fifty badged volunteers, had cleared away the field of pilgrims, mats, and cars, leaving a huge open quadrangle. Literally drifting in from nowhere, from pockets and crevices in the neighbouring hills and mountains, as far as the eye could see, along obscure bullock paths out of nearby rice paddies, which in turn, ran head-on into banks of arid stark mountains, and from the river-bed of the Chitravati River, regions as bleak as a planetoid or a dead star, came ant trails of the starved and the destitute. How far they had come, or how they had gotten word that today was the day for feeding the poor, was just another of an endless series of puzzles. They shuffled in—hollow eye sockets, toothpick arms, limbless, atrophied, noseless, fly and dung-covered, bruised, tortured, swollen, and baked like prunes—and a Seva Dal member, almost crossing a thousand layers of inbred caste repulsion, but now realizing the unity of mankind in a leap of faith and a desire to please the master, would resist holding his nose, and direct each zombie to his place on the ground. By nine, in the magnesium-white glare, the long compound was layered with rows of the poor, running the entire length of the compound from the Veda school at the far end to our room, and its mirror image connected to us, the "town hall." They were awaiting Baba's arrival. It was sunstroke weather, and I could already feel the powerful beams penetrating the granite whitewashed wails of our room. The room was empty except for Bruce, who was lying down still suffering from diarrhoea and depression.

The gale of human voices outside, my weariness from lack of sleep, and my certainty that half an hour out there in the sunrays, and I would feel fever, almost quelled my conscience in my lying down. Besides Baba had a mammoth enough problem out there, and my absence would have such a low priority on his gradient of awareness, that it was doubtful that either Bruce or I would be missed.

Half asleep, a sonic boom, and then a dead quiet alerted me that Baba was approaching the compound from the side. I closed my eyes again. The screen-door quietly opened, then shut.

My eyes opened. It was Baba.

With umpteen years of boarding school Bruce's autonomic system went "ten hupt." He was up in a flash, and ready to start apologizing. Me too. I figured I didn't have a chance in the world to start rationalizing. Baba knew the rottenness of the human mind, and it would have to be his charity from here on.

Baba looked around at the room in a shambles. It didn't phase him. No harsh judgement.

In a note of things-as-usual, "Come on Lazzies, service is needed. Too many peoples. What is wrong, some ill-feeling."

"No Baba, feel great. A little earlier felt bad, but now feel fine."

"Get ready and follow me." Baba left.

I felt giddy from over excitement, my heart-rate tripled than what it was.

Bruce and I looked at each other, and started scrambling. Three minutes later we emerged before the watching world, scrubbed, vital, and wearing freshly starched and ironed kurtas and cotton pants, resembling white sailor's uniforms. We joined Baba and Raja Reddy in the adjacent garden near Nanda's porch, ten feet above the compound, and handed down stacks of saris to the Seva Dal below. Every ragged peasant woman would be given a new cotton sari. There were thousands of them. Not only would there be a "feeding of the five thousand" but they would be given clothing as well. In the act of handing the saris out were some of the girls, governor Nakul Sen's wife, and June with a look of unbearable compassion and a brand new silk sari of her own. The virtue of the moment and the good works satisfied some internal quota within Bruce, and he momentarily cheered up. Not exactly the five loaves and the fishes to feed the five thousand, and not necessarily any overt miracles of sudden increase going on, yet it, was a welcome sight to see the giant brass cauldrons lugged down paths from the canteen area.

On the final night of the festival, Bruce's mood was a disaster, a number of people were troubled, even Kerry and Janet, and I myself, usually positive and brimming with faith in Baba, was taxed in making an effective case on "the master's" behalf.

The parting scene in the auditorium was an unveiling of Baba's fuller glory as the embodiment of beauty and truth, coinciding with the eve celebrating the cosmic mother in her pinnacle of glory, as Mahasaraswati.

As the mother aspect of godhood, Baba shimmered and dazzled, smiled and reclined on a large silver-plated swing couch. Swaying the "jhula" to and fro was an invisible row of boys whose crossed legs could be seen under the couch. Baba was wearing his once-yearly, silk embroidered, "Om" and "Sai Baba" monogramed white grown. To the side, so Baba could be entertained, and so we could be entertained watching Baba being entertained, was a series of singers and minstrels, each successively worse than the preceding.

At the side gate, we all deliberated. Bruce had been cheated, and was shaking his head plaintively. A pathetic laugh, "All I can think of is Jean Harlow." He wasn't the only one.

Cultural variable; he had been burned by a chain of sick associations. "If you're pure enough," I justified, "you don't see all that garbage. Clean twenty years of TV out of your head, and you'll be back in the batting."

The side-show productions hadn't been much easier on him either. True, they had depressed me a little as well. "Ok, when is it ever good enough? Get Ralph Richardson, Olivier, and Alec Guiness doing 'Henry the Fifth' as a side-play, and it's still substandard. Or get the best production of Bach's 'Magnificat,' and it still falls short of saying it."

Eddie did the Harlem shuffle. "Yeah, or get Stokely Jackson doin' Oh, Dem Bones." A pained chuckle issued from Bruce.

14

By the 23 November birthday festival a month later, many of us could feel the toll of being in the home stretch for five months out in the bleak wilds of one of the poorest and hottest states in south India. The "chipper" days of the Whitefield Brindavan academy seemed in the far past. And what accentuated the duration of our stay even more was that, due to the heat and hostility of the terrain, our actual free movement was very limited, confining us to a monotonous few acres here and there outside the ashram itself. I figured out at one point that I had not left the ashram for over a month.

During the time between the mammoth Dashara festival and the birthday festival, the westerners seemed to be going through their second phase of weeding out. Each drifting along his own privately tailored, internally reinforced route to higher awareness. Often strangers to one another, we pursued doggedly the complex beckonings of the strand of intuitive thread within each of us. True, some of us compared notes, had heart-to-heart talks, but our courses were sealed, each balanced on a slightly different ledge up the awesome granite slope of the mountain of truth. The Hindu's called this mount Himavat.

When Baba left the ashram immediately after the last festival to flush out the myriad pilgrims, we were faced again with the reality of backlogs of unworked through hang-ups and problems. They stuck out like sore thumbs in the post-festival quiet. Also in the wake were two almost dry wells, brown with sediment, and each with its own family of large turtles. There was also the physical depletion. For five months the diet had been rice and pepper water with traces of vegetables. I had lost weight and stamina. And for five months before that, I had still been a vegetarian, though the diet was more varied. Altogether ten months without meat, milk, fish, eggs, and only a few samples of cheese.

Between the two festivals, Bruce spent much of the time in Bangalore ostensibly to get a letter for a residence permit, but also to settle deep-seated doubts and unarticulated complexities of thought. A number of others also used the opportunity to go to Whitefield for the change of air, more intimacy with Baba, and for settling visa problems. They were all but ignored. Bruce moved to Bangalore to westernized guest lodge called the Regent Guest House on Brigade Road, an oasis for transient westerners, with piped rock music, hamburgers, and waffles. We all knew that Bruce was flirting with dangerous territory when his only resolution could come through sticking by Baba's side. When he came back to Puttaparthi just in time for the birthday festival, he was in miserable spirits. It was a last ditch effort, half there and half on the road, his defense was to keep his head in the clouds, and not let anything get at him. It didn't work.

Also leaving was Hans. His crisis of faith came right after the festival. Unkempt, dishevelled, his clothes looked like an old wash-cloth. Thin and fighting constant moods of malignancy, even more wide-eyed than before, he either seemed to cower in fear or march around with forced aggression. For quite some time he, had fallen into the role of an outcaste, incommunicado with everybody except Benno, Zolt, India, and Marsha.

At one point the Canadian High Commissioner and the brother of Prime Minister Trudeau of Canada appeared. Kasturi, Kerry and I acted as liaison. The evening before, while we were serving them a five-course meal on silver plates driven up in the land-rover from Raja Reddy's private kitchen, they had just finished their Baba interview, and could do little more than sit, shudder, fidget, and sigh. Spellbound, it took them quite some time to keep the conversational ball rolling. The most spectacular gift, reluctantly taken out of Mrs Trudeau's purse amazed us. It was a large heavy rosary made out of 108 semi-precious stones. At the bottom was a large bloodstone crucifix, with her name, the date, and Baba's blessings written on the stone. They spent a long time describing how it could not have been prestidigitated. Out of Baba's quivering extended hand, the rosary exploded. As usual, the sleeve was pulled back. Besides, Baba simply touched the gem on a ring that one of them had owned for years, and it changed right in front of their eyes, still well mounted in the base of the ring—it went from something like ruby to diamond. And how could he have known of their dreams, or some of their well guarded secrets? It was too much. Now they had to make the psychological adjustment that he might be God on earth after all. A little man in south India in a red robe, too much.

Kerry and I watched the dust trail rise in the distance. We automatically started humming the same song. Then stopped, looked at one another, smiled, and sang, "There's somethin happenin' in here, but you don' know what it is. Do You, Mr Jones?" Kasturi was smiling, halfway with us. "Bob Dylan," Kerry smiled at him wryly.

Five months later, in March, the Canadian High Commissioner was back, in Whitefield, this time with a New York publisher. Baba, forever unpredictable, and swarmed with important people and projects, hardly noticed them. He could see them the next day, but they were only in the area for that day. Too bad, maybe next time.

By the later half of November, Kerry and Janet were also having bouts with faith along with several others. They had been stiching with each other a lot, avoiding just about everybody except me, Ed, and Chris. They had gone on long walks, stared at cloud formations and sunsets looking for a sign and they talked. Red Hawk had been cut off from Whitefield, and they needed reference points fast. Who was Baba? What was his real secret, the final message? And who or what were they? The answer was tabulating slowly, though when they hinted at it, it was with a note of rebellion and defensiveness.

The first indication of their new-found freedom and boldness came several days before the birthday festival. The long months of having to use the mountain-top as a commode had festered within them. It was an indignity, a degradation. Especially when they fancied that the wealthier cubical-owners looked on with a sense of satisfaction and superiority everytime they had to stumble up the hillside with a tin-can of water. What kind of dual standard Brahmin hypocrisy was that? Didn't they realize that the joke turned back on them. Intoxicated with a feeling of cultural superiority and bathing in an idealization of tradition, the fact eluded the Indians that had they not been backward, at times almost in the stone age, and instead, had been civilized and educated, such things as squatting like an animal in the bushes would have long been abolished. What the average giggling little Brahmin needs to see is the vast, spotless toilet facilities at Dulles Airport. But he already knows that. That's why he feels the need to giggle. He is ashamed that as much truth that his culture harbours, it can't even put up the simplest outhouse. But Vivekananda had already said that back at the turn of the century. Things were still no different.

Sitting in a deck-chair outside his cubical, perhaps twenty feet down the long porch from where Kerry and Janet lay their bedding, was a well-to-do banker from one of the large cities, reading the equivalent of the Financial Times, perhaps with a few good *slokas* interspersed for good measure. Since he had arrived, he had made painstaking efforts not to acknowledge either Kerry or Janet. He scowled when grinned at, adjusted his glasses, and kept reading. Each succeeding confrontation soured worse between them. Kerry finally opened the floodgates of hell, turned on the burners of his intellect to full blast, and stood over the man's deck-chair giving him a well-versed multi-level character assassination that was a work of artistry if not genius. What the incoherent and stunned little provincial could not explain was how so bedraggled a hippy, as he had often labelled Kerry, was able to effortlessly command levels of fluency, multivac throught structures that well surpassed him. Of course, he was too unsophisticated to understand the irony of the scene, or the connotative import of the name McLuhan.

Still as red as an ember, Kerry confessed to me that particular archetype was one of his worst stumbling-blocks. The smug supercilious hypocrite. Was it an accident that this particular dude was so strategically placed on his porch? Kerry, I knew, could tolerate almost anything. What strange timing for so repugnant an adversary to show up.

With the score-board grussly uneven, and with the battlefield of direct verbal confrontation out of the question, a more subterfuge approach was needed. Till then, the high-born banker would have to gnash his teeth in silence and summon up the full expertise of a genealogy of subtle and glib tongues, rumour-mongering.

Tired of the hillside and the noonday heat, and perhaps in protest against so needless a tradition, Kerry quietly disappeared behind the long row of secondary cubicles whose backs faced the street with a barbed-wire fence, bushes, and trees in between them, and the outside street. In the hidden shadows of the foliage, Kerry squatted down to defecate. Many of the westerners had learned this expedient method from the Veda School boys.

Suddenly a battle cry was sounded. From out of the little barred window directly above Kerry, a shrill hysterical woman's voice addressed the Untouchable. "Pah, Pah, Pah," voice trembling with righteous indignation. This was a means of addressing the most scab-infested dogs.

Kerry was glued to the ground in the act, and couldn't move. "Pah, Pah, Pah." She wouldn't stop. She and her husband had him in the clutches of victory, and wouldn't relinquish an inch. They looked on and discussed him between them, as though unaware that even foreign Untouchables have a degree of humanity and dignity. There was no honourable escape, and they knew it. For even the most imaginative, resourceful, and sublime of Indians would melt in humiliation, denuded of a means of counterattack or escape.

However, not necessarily so with true yogis and mystics. The house of the banker failed to account for the fact that an adept, as well as having had order experiences in the beatific, has had equal command of the cosmic sewage conduits of subterranean abominations and infernalities. Some of the most astounding all-time vulgarities, traumas of ego-busting, were performed by the most enlightened sages. The other half of humanity who could come out the victors in so tight a situation were the rednecks of the deep South.

Anyone so savage as to look on ranked on par with something on a hog farm. A prolonged stare down the old eyes with the Indians didn't register shame. So Kerry whistled and looked at cloud formations, holding the dignity of an Edwardian Polo player. He washed his hands and anus with a quarter of a can of water, as was the Indian method, stood up, looked through the bars of the hog shed, and blasted a column of water through yelling, "SOOWEEE, SOOOWAAAY," and walked off as the two onlookers sank in stunned silence.

Kasturi later ambled over in the form of the disciplinarian, giving Kerry a lecture on ethnic traditions and local etiquette. He was giving a bad name to the Americans, according to Kasturi. Already disastrous rumours were about. Kerry told Kasturi the other half of the story and he ambled off, later in the evening, towards the House of the Banker.

An unforeseen source of silent contention among the old American contingent, already in a malaise of testings and spiritual insecurities, was a sudden wave of new arrivals from the States. They rolled in about four days before the birthday festival, having been sent up ahead from Whitefield by Baba. Sky high with enthusiasm and shining like lights, they somewhat paled the older crowd. What kind of inferior crew was the old contingent to be around the spiritual magnetic pole of the world and yet look so somber? No, they were the chosen ones, high enough to handle who Baba really was, and set the standard. They were vigorous and rarin' to go. But as groovy and dazzling as they were, the older crowd wasn't impressed. When they came on high or strong, they didn't strike awe into the hearts of the "old-timers." They might get a nod, or a an "uh-huh,' or a lecture or words of caution or advice, but not a hip-hip-hooray."

But wow, man, they'd had inklings, visions, high-order experiences, you name it. "Oh, yeah, what else?"

Suddenly they were describing a spiritual Brooklyn Bridge to the residents of a spiritual Yonkers who'd seen it just about every day from the year on. But maybe the locals had become jaded and unable to appreciate the subtler nuances. You know, familiarity breeds contempt.

Finally, the new flight squad had to ask questions like where to go to the bathroom, what's the word for water, and what not, and the old hierarchy was absorbing the new. One hard to get around institution happened to be me. I was one of the "main men." If they were slow to learn it, Eddie told them in a language that stuck. A greater authority figure, who was not bowled over by their presence, was Kasturi. But weren't they emissaries called in to help issue along the new age? Maybe, but get your footing first.

The most dramatic reaction to Baba's force in the interview was Will's, who had to be nursemaided around the ashram by Joan, as he staggered and stumbled into buildings, swaying and falling from side to side, from about six in the evening until late into the night. I couldn't tell whether he had been attuned to a very acute state of receptivity by Baba, or whether his capacities were indeed so pea-sized that he was like a flea in a barrel of rum, confusing the thimble with the ocean. He ended up hyper-oxygenating in huge exaggerated gasps, heaving his entire torso up and down, head rolling loosely on top, resembling an absolutely wiped-out cross-country runner. He spent an hour in the girl's cubical being tended to in this condition, then moved to the suite that most of the new comers were sharing at the far end of the compound, adjacent to the Veda School. His gasps slowly subsided, and Will drifted to sleep. Meanwhile, Ed, Wendell, and I borrowed Arnie's stereo cassette recorder, took it up to the mountain top, and, at least for Ed and I, heard the first strains of back home music in well over six months; James Taylor, *Fire and Rain, Country Road.* The Band. *The Night They Drove Old Dixie Down,* Crosby, Stills, and Nash, *Long Time Gone, Wooden Ships*—all songs I had never heard before.

It didn't exactly bring me down, but it got to me, infecting my innards with an almost haunting passion for release.

On around 21 November, I was again called on to balance delicately within the paradox of spiritual leadership. I was to give another speech. This time before several thousands, in the second largest shed-auditorium, where we had painted the signs. It would be before the composite of the All India Sathya Seva Dal and the All India Sathya Seva Smithi, a significant cross-section of India's super-rich, educators and intelligentsia, nobility, as well as a goodly chunk of India's crown of political officialdom, cabinet members, ministers, governors, right up to the vice-president.

Speaking before me was the famed yogess, Indira Devi. Baba beckoned her on stage. Baba leaned his cheek on his hand, and mumbled into the microphone, "Indra Devi." He smiled at the audience, "come up Indra Devi." This great American yogi was being bantered about. Baba, as Krishna, was lampooning the formalities of the world, the hierarchies of mankind, the audience's expectation of the woman in ochre. But everybody knew there was great familial love behind it.

Wide-eyed, shock faced, and severe, she resembled a Victorian matron passing a bawdy armed guard at a wayside tavern. Not that she didn't know how to rise to the occasion with Indians. She did, having once lived here years ago. Now with what might seem almost arrogance to some, she asserted herself boldly. She spoke of being in America with the indwelling Baba, and how she has survived through the traumas of life. She was on a Los Angeles six-lane freeway. Her arms widened to communicate the immensity. Her front tyre blew out, the car careened, she screamed "Sai Ram," the car spun around, went into the median as about six other cars and several mack trucks barely missed her. Baba's supernatural covenant of grace was summoned at the instant she pronounced his name. Recently she was also under occult attack. At three a.m. after dreaming about a coven, she followed an inner leading, found the door of the house knocked trying to decimate her, and in the power of Baba, stood her ground and told them who she was. She removed a certain "threatening" envelope from her mail-box, other incidents occurred, and the terrible power was quelled through the divine love of Baba. Many of the women bhaktas raised their hands with Mataji to *namaste* Satya Sai Baba. She quickly stepped away from the microphone. Baba smiled patiently.

Then he looked right at me, and smiled gently. A son in whom he was well pleased. As I stood at the front microphone, he whispered to me and I came over. With patient kindness, "Talk ten minutes, *Bas*. You have a message? Good." As I talked, he left his chair, sat against the front-stage wall, at times curling up in concentration, hand bracing his head. Maybe he was fuelling me, or maybe, he was straining to decipher my words out of the bad acoustics, my accent, and occasional words longer than four syllables. Many of the forces in front strained in concentration, an expression not unfamiliar to me.

It had been a song I had disliked so much I never really mastered the words. "I don't really know any English songs Baba, but I can sing the audience a Sanskrit song. How about Nataraja?"

Baba nodded, his patience a little taxed. "Never mind, sit down, sit down."

The afternoon session soon ended as Baba, whose movements can never be predicted, got up and left from rear entrance. As I got up from one of the front rows, leaned against the stage to recuperate, Indra Devi did what only Indra Devi could have gotten away with. She stepped over the tabooed red dividing carpet, crossed over into the men's section, and threw her arms around me like a long lost relative. "Thatt Vas Turrific. I hope they could appreciate it." I shook her hand. "Thanks, thanks a lot." She waved goodbye, and scuttled off.

A funny feeling came over me. Something was wrong. I somehow had to get feedback from Baba immediately.

As I ran out into the crowds, where Baba was now out giving darshan, a catastrophic feeling, a sense of loneliness and doom mounted. Baba hastily walked between lines of people, followed by several close attendants. He came around the rear side of the prayer-hall. I was between that and the men's suite. He saw me. I sensed a heavy emotion in him. I forced my way inside the swaying mass of men shufffling around and making room for him. He almost walked right past me but stopped, looked to the side with a frown. He spoke in low rapid irritation. "Too long. Too fast speaking. Words too complicated. American accent not understanding. Not enough surrender sir."

"My accent is the same as the last speech. Everybody understood that."

"Indra Devi just now tell me that she not understand, and Indian ladies not understand." My eyes fell to the ground, I looked back searchingly, and Baba walked on.

Had this whole thing been a set-up to put my ego on the chopping-block? My mouth felt full of marbles. No self-defence would either justify my performance or get him to appreciate it any better. And if this was some kind of mysterious mind-bending operation of his, nothing I could do now would free me from this ambivalence.

Not to protest him on the spot was a form of surrender. A feeling of caution stopped me from implying that he was streching the truth—Indra Devi could not have possibly talked to him. He went out from the back, leaving several minutes before either of us had left. Besides, she was with me, and not only that, told me to my face that she thought the talk was terrific. If she had been double-faced with me and Baba, then what kind of discernment did he have to choose an emissary like that? Besides, the only way she could have told him would be to have run up to him, panting, and marching right behind him spilling out her feelings about what a lousy talk Tal had given, as he moved quickly about the ashram. If Indra Devi had not in fact spoken to him . . . well . . . the implication forced a kind of vacuum inside me. My heart sank, I had to be alone and think. Somehow, I would have to extract the truth from Indra Devi. "Say, did you run into Baba right after he left?"

"No."

"Well, Baba said . . . ."

"He must be testing you. I've been tested many times. Don't let it get your goat. He only does that to his most special disciples."

The heaviness of my mood lasted into the night. A rare thing for me, I could now sympathize with so many of the others who had bouted with feelings of futility.

I ran right into the next trouble spot. The second serious showdown that Kerry was having with the authorities. This time as the divine standard-bearer of humane treatment to animals. Baba had ordered the dogs off again, and some of them had been stoned, indeed cinder-blocked, by a number of Veda School lads. None of the authorities protested. Kerry warned the kids himself. Fifteen minutes later, a number of them heaved a rock on "Talking Dog." Kerry went over, slapped two of the kids hard, and hammer locked another one.

By 25 November, Baba wisely and in loving kindness told the entire camp of Westerners to follow him back to Whitefield where they could live for several months with him in a different and cooler setting. The old contingent breathed sighs of relief, and left with various new members to find housing in the Whitefield area.

Echoing loudly in our minds were vivid impressions of Baba made captive during the festival. The distillation of it all, reiterated by the new contingent, was that whatever else, Sai Baba was clearly not a human being—a human body he had, but the awareness operating within it just didn't think, or act as people did.

"I am the embodiment of truth. This is the first time in history that mankind has had the chance of being with me in this number. In the Dwarka age and former ages, the rishis would meditate for years, and yet your chance is much greater than theirs. The moment you come into my presence, all your sins are forgiven. I can give you full self-realization, and take you back to the eternal limitless god-consciousness.

"Do not try to compare my power with those petty powers of magicians. My power is divine and has no limit. I have the power to change the earth into the sky and the sky into the earth. But I don't because there is no reason to do it. If all the fourteen worlds and planes (scripture for half the domains in existence) tried to join up against me, they could not make a dent in trying to thwart my mission. If all the twenty-eight worlds and planes were to try to join up in opposition to me, they could not do a thing. I am beyond any obstacle, and there is no force, natural or supernatural, that can stop me or my mission. Do not lose this chance, it is more important than you will ever realize. Do not forfeit the chance to be in my presence."

15

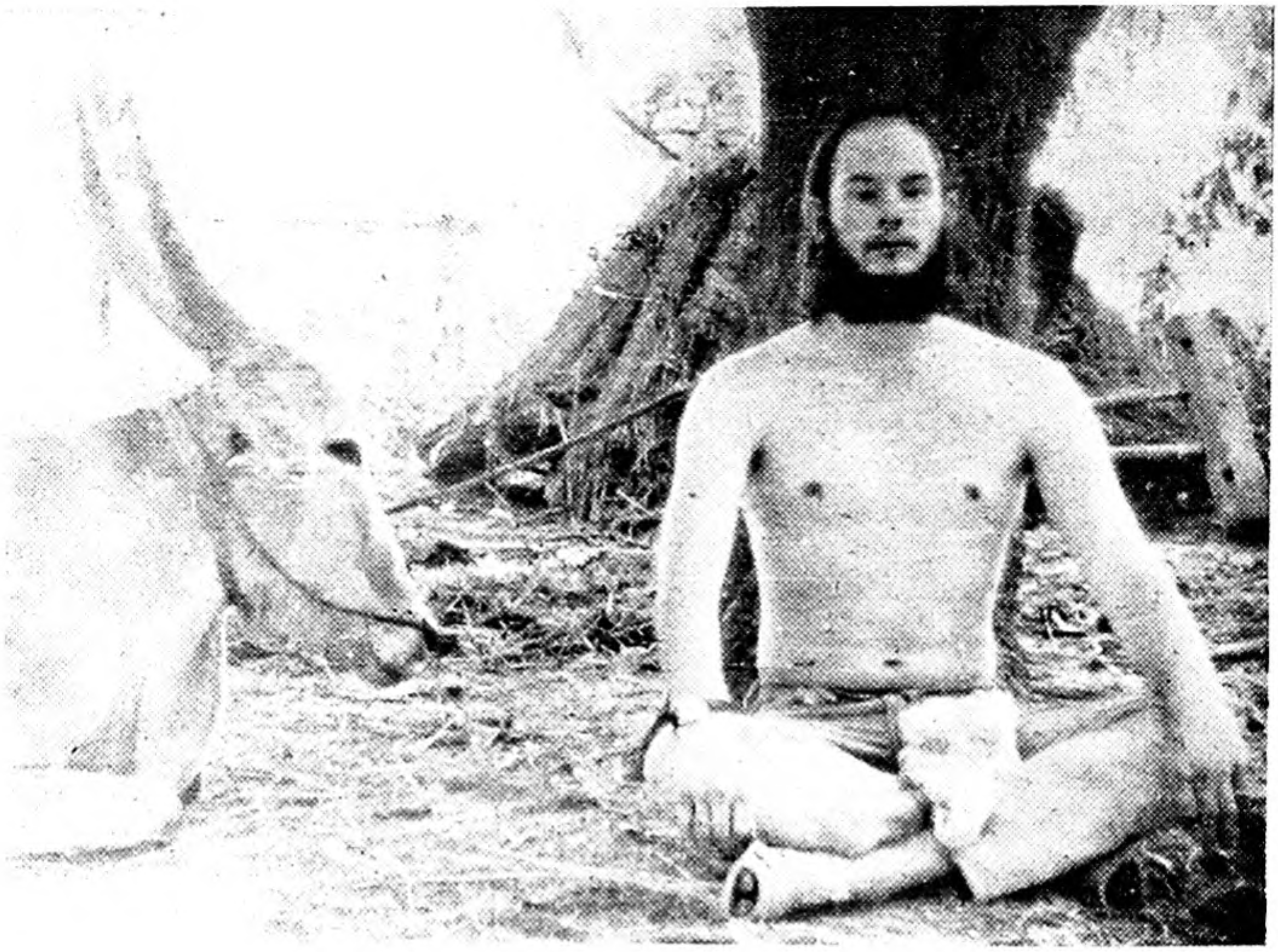
Our colony was the most coveted locale of all the western contingents. Two miles away, adjacent to Brindavan, was the girls' house in the filthy village of Kadugodi which so many of us objected to. It faced the train depot. In it were India, Marsha, Michelle, Betty, Jnani, and Barbara. The other colonies were scattered.

For those two weeks before Baba's departure, our contacts with him were minimal. We were lodged into a routine of coming and going to darshans mechanically. Our colony began to look inwardly for activity.

I returned home one afternoon to tell the group that Baba had just told me that Jai was to be off limits if anybody saw him about. I carried my bike into the large front hall as Ed's barking voice plied me with more questions. I took pride in censoring some of Baba's comments which might have confounded spiritual neophytes. Such confidences were the delicate high wires in the walk that a Master required of the young adept. This gave me a to-be-coveted solitude from the others at times.

Wafting through the house was a peculiar fragrant intermingling of Himalayan incense, sandalwood, and kitchen odours of

Many Faces of Baba.



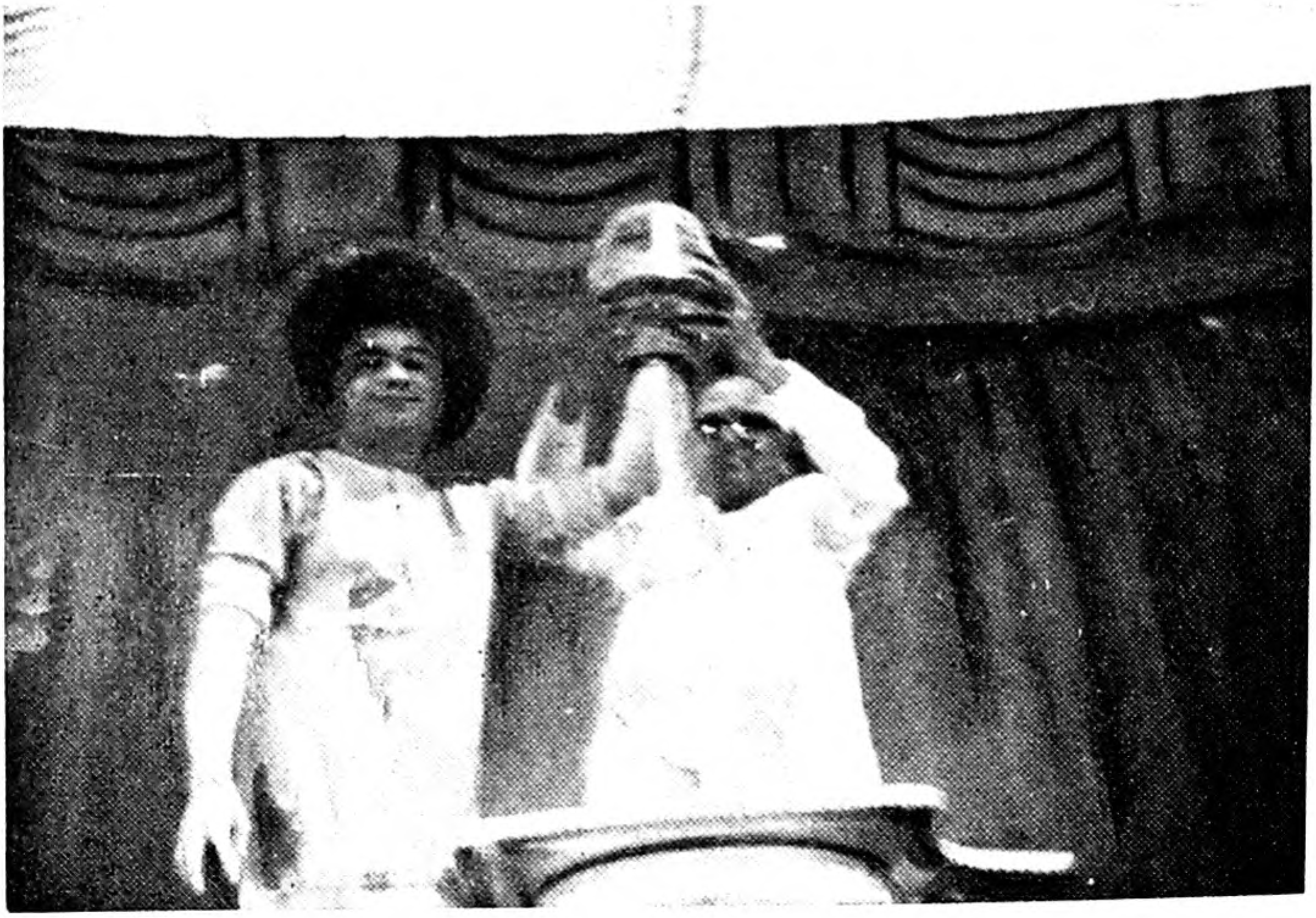
Tal meditating.

Calangute Beach at mid-day.

ROYAL HOTEL

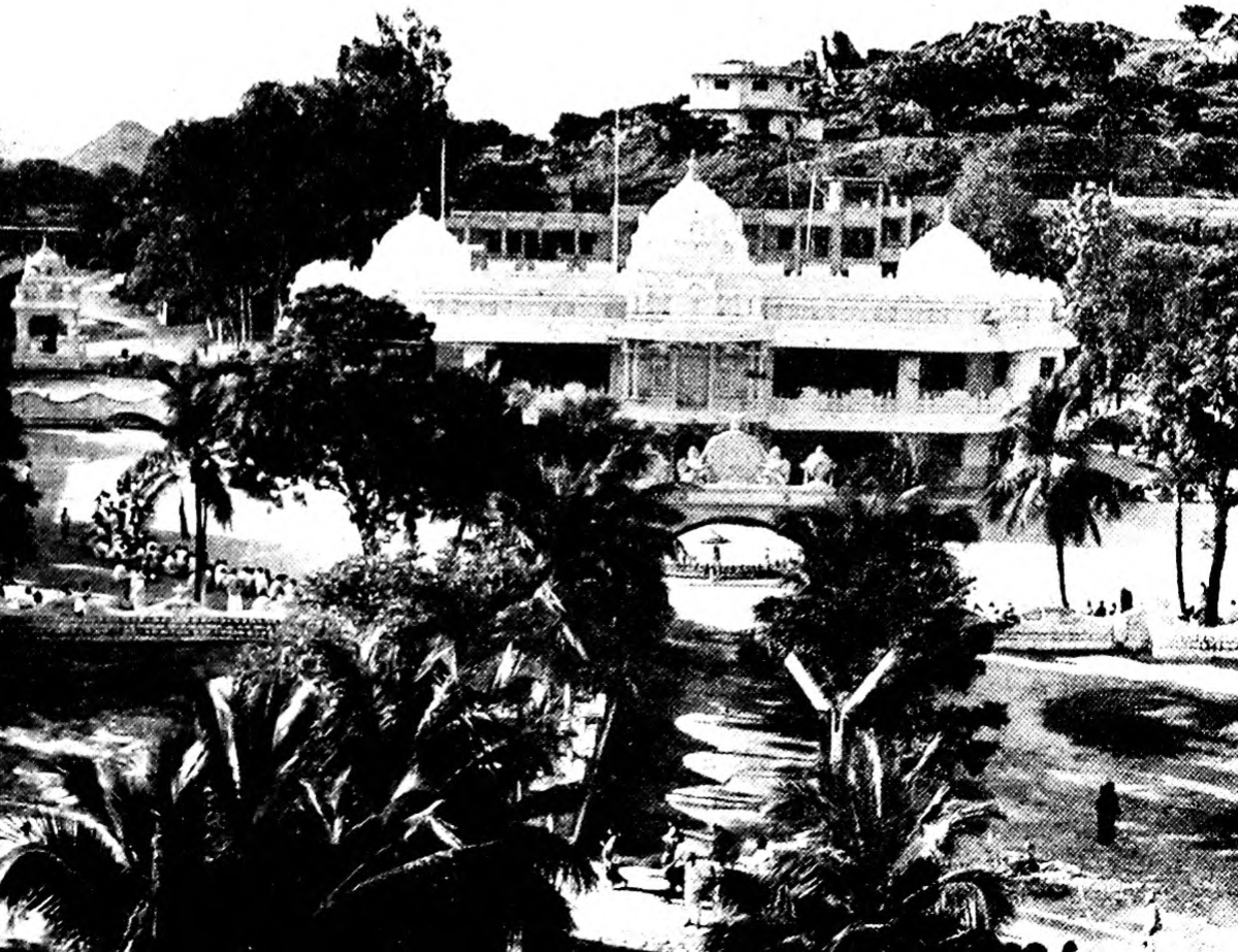
Devotees waiting for Baba's emergence at Mahasivaratri festival.

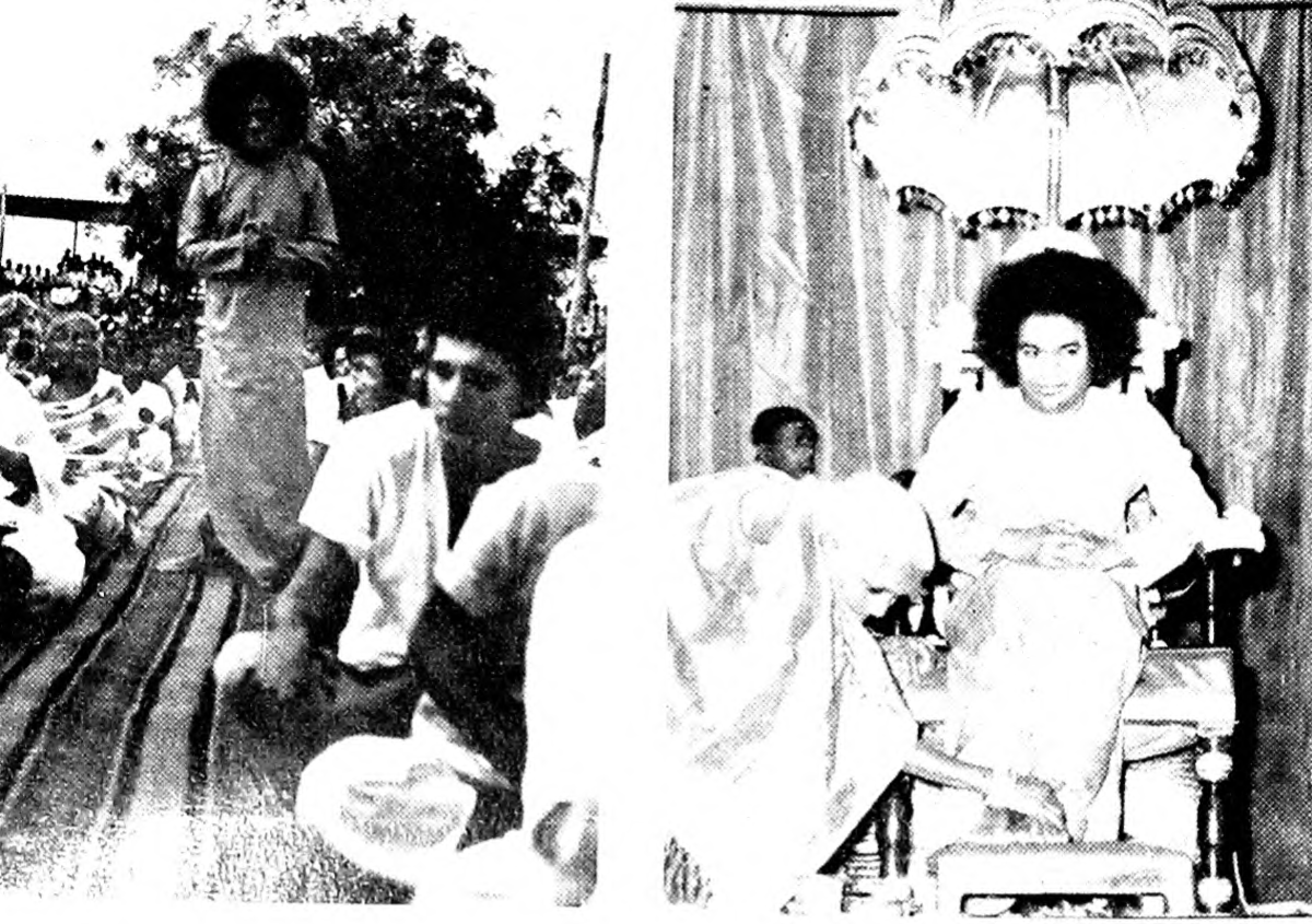
Baba washing statue of Shirdi Sai Baba with milk.



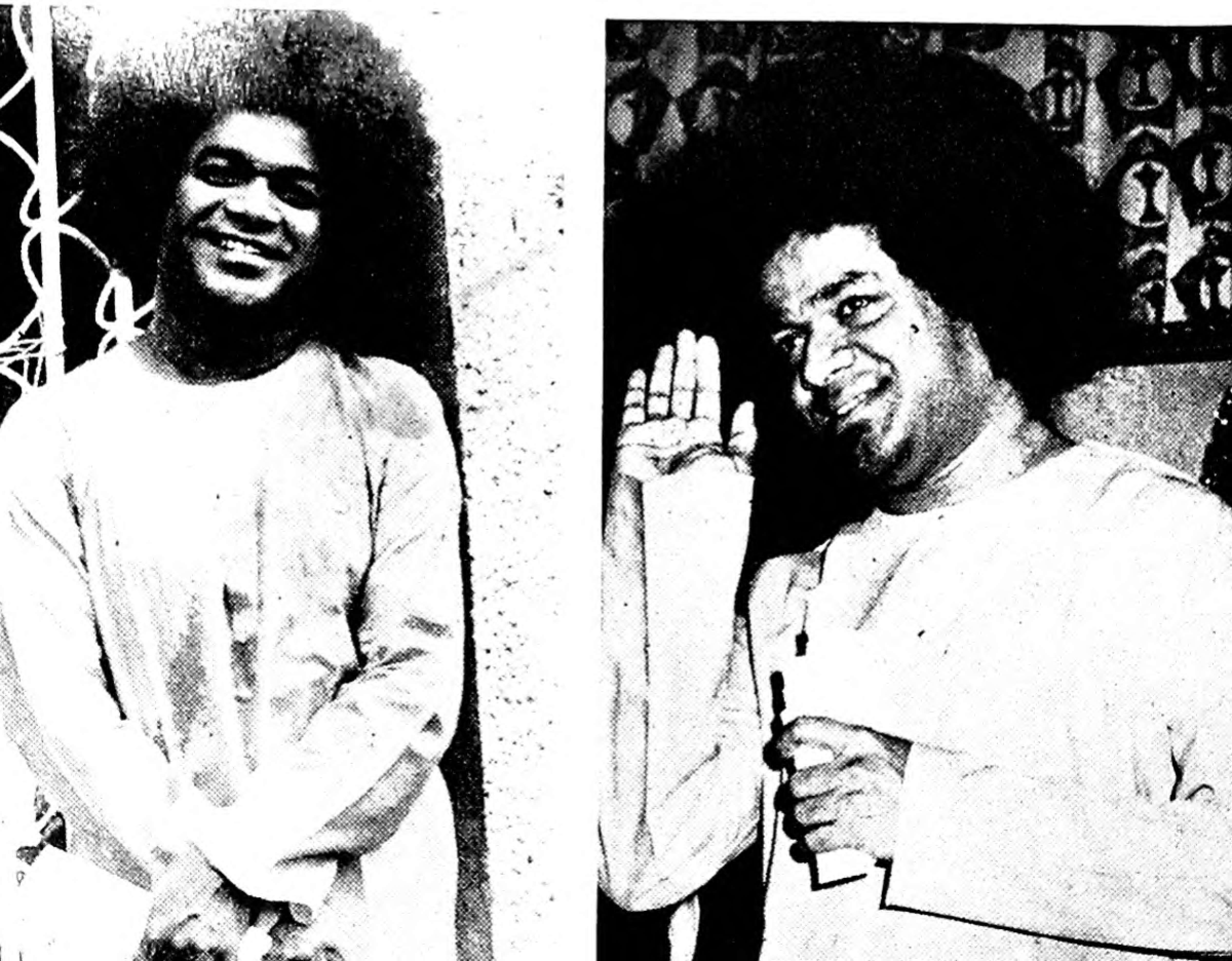
Baba distributing vibhuti.

A view of Prasanthi Nilayam. On the hill is the octagonal building.

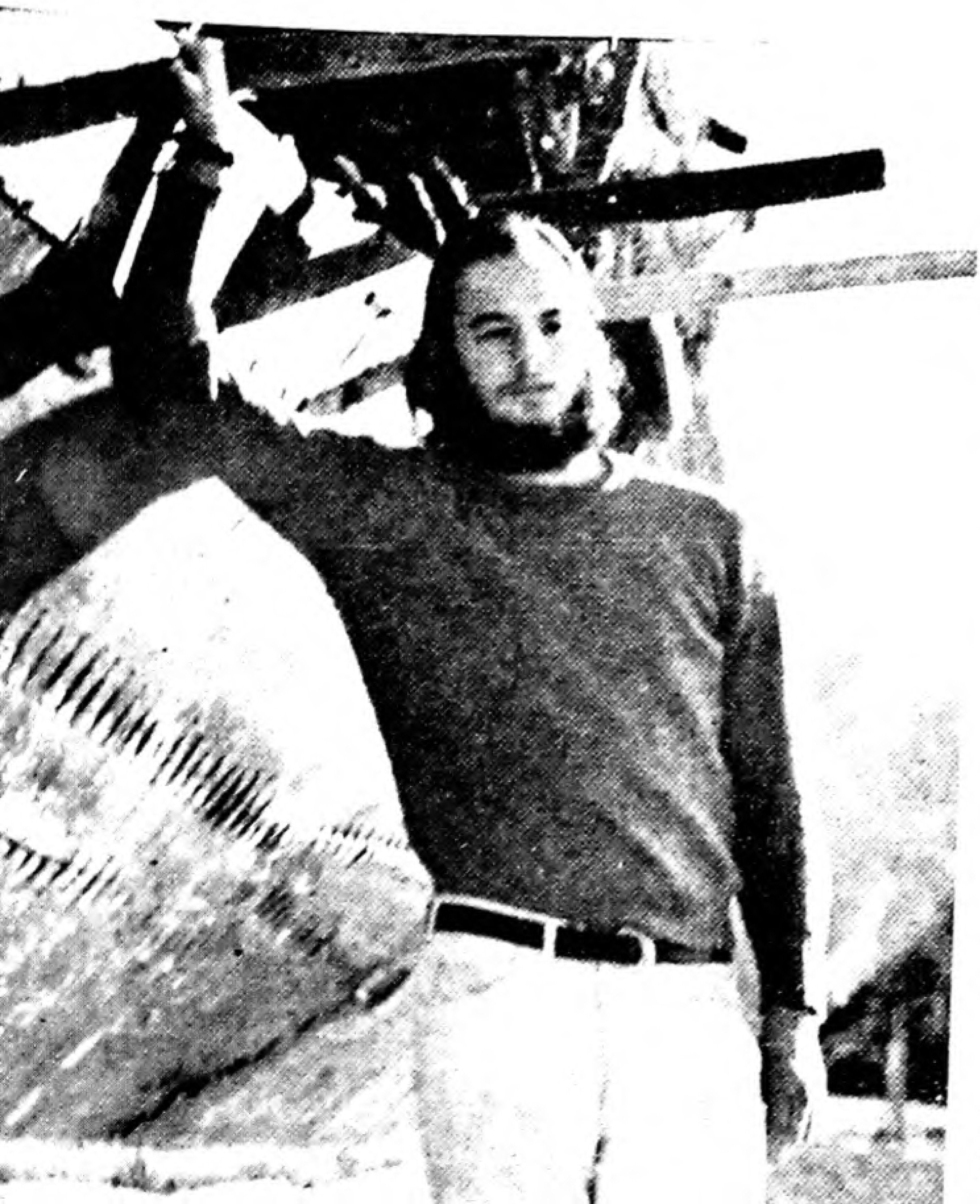




Baba giving darshan.



Howard, Eddie, Wendel and Jerry having tea.



Tal, the Baba Jnanin.

Tal in Goa.

Sai Baba speaking at the super-auditorium at Dharmakshetra, his Bombay residence. At least 15,000 were present.

soojie (a hot cereal), bananas, chapatis, fried eggplant, Kitchrie (rice and dal), and mango. Togetherness exuded from eyeryone. The cooks, Kerry, Janet, and Victoria, were heavily absorbed in a conversation about aura fields and the inner light. Jerry, panda-bearish, sat in his little side room with an etheric smile pasted on his face, wrapped in a towel, and sitting on an air mattress.

At darshan, I noticed Doctor Bhagavantam, back from his long tour halfway around the world which has begun soon after the Dashara festival. I had requested some favours of him, and was anxious to hear the reports. One request was that he see my father, a retired United States diplomat living in London. I figured that my father, a hardened skeptic, would listen to a world renowned physicist, who was also a diplomatic liaison to the United Nations as well as the chief scientific advisor to the Government of India, over and above practically anybody else. I had cabled my father of the tight time schedule that the scientist had, narrowing down their meeting to a two-hour dinner in a London vegetarian restaurant. As far as I knew, I might never see my father again, and wanted him to at least know that I had not squandered my life away on some unhinged mystic, but was under the discipleship of the most universally recognized holy man in India, one of the few that the populace trusted, no mean attribute, of which was his command of miraculous powers.

But Bhagavantam, a very intelligent and distinguished-looking man, shook his head. The meeting was of little avail. My father had asked pointed and probing questions about my welfare, accepted the reports of the miraculous as untenable, short, of a first-hand empirical look, and even then, there would remain plenty of room for doubt. What remained was a deep love between a father and a son, and a gulf of geography and belief in between, frustrating every channel for that love to pass like an inter-stellar vacuum. One of my deepest sources of torment and anguish that would periodically emerge from even the most dulled equanimity I might muster, was that the inhuman requirements of the path that I had chosen to walk could not help but cause deep grief and bewilderment in those whom I loved, my father above all. That for me to surgically remove myself from the phenomenal universe, and cut every strand of worldly attachment in order to once and for all annihilate the ego, that very cancer that kept me from God-consciousness, meant that among the strands I had to amputate, with the brute coldness of a fisherman cutting up an earthworm on a dock, my "illusory" affections for those whom I loved. My dread was the one-sided misunderstanding and deep hurt that would inevitably slam back on my father; that for every gasp of love that went out searching for me, it would meet a vacuum. And my father's love would bray at night, like an abandoned sheep forlorn in an arid wilderness, and not knowing how or why. And still covered in a dense cloud of unknowing, he would pass out of life ignorant of the splendour of my fate, bereft of a sense of hope, and instead, anchored by a peculiar scnce of injustice. While somewhere in India, his son will have vanished forever, becoming the non-son; the body still living on, yet a different look in the eyes, and a different voice speaking. Just a hollowed out shell, filled with the soul of the universe.

As dusk was setting in on the Whitefield house, the electric lights coming on and dinner procedures underway, I tried to enter the flow of our group togetherness. Yet, a lingering mystery remaind. With all the positive things happening with us, why was Baba becoming more remote?

Despite a kind of group spirit and frontiersman's sense of purpose which our colony induced, things were not all well. A cold desolation still leaked through my mind in the silent hours. But to flee into the world for a yogi was a visible retrogression. No, those of us who felt the cold had to bear it, and press on.

As far as Baba was concerned, I feared that the togetherness of our colony was little more than a distracting illusion getting in the way of my relationship with him. I could feel my mind armouring me for a split off, now realizing that these new and dear friends might be just as transient as the whole procession of faces that had floated by me in the past. And no group happening would change one's solitary accountability to God.

Instead, I tried to get back into the flow, but with the detachment of an overnight traveller enjoying a strange town, as I went out the back door to visit Kerry and Janet who had since appropriated the rear cottage. Lights ablaze at twilight faintly patterning the lawn, and the smell of *soojie* and papaya melon issuing from the kitchen, both of them chattered while busily cooking, washing, and sweeping.

They froze in mid-sentence, laid down their stuff, looked at each other, and put on their most spiritual, brother-hood-of-man, goodwill-to-all-beings smile. If Norman Rockewell could do an illustration of the good-hearted, neighbourly, albeit slightly, cosmic American-Hindu couple, this was it.

Facing them, smiling ear to ear with Christian goodwill and loving concern, were two elderly people who looked like tall splendid oak trees with the fear and reverence for God etched deeply into the bark of their Midwestern faces. Other than as Walt Disney cartoon archetypes, these two salts were on extinct specie that I had never seen outside a storybook or history book setting. They had, in my world, been mocked and all but erased, pushed off the quiet simplicity of their farms and country churches, and replaced by the fast high life of neon-linked boulevards that never knew them, and liberated modern minds that had transcended such bygone squareness—a squareness apparently too dumb to want a new Pontiac or a good time. Indeed, an oh-so-tiresome squareness that taxed the patience of the culturatti and intelligentsia of my world, and one that divided me right down the middle with gladness on the one hand and rebellious contempt on the other. They struck me right off as the types of incredible people who would cry if they told a fib, were honest right down to the last rusty button, and would give you the shirts off their backs while still feeling repentant before Jehovah God that they hadn't given you more. The light within us, it was evident from the start, was slightly different from the light that was within them.

The tall hickory thin man looked down at Kerry from six feet five, and cheerfully extended his hand, speaking with a grinning soft-spokenness, "Hello. I'm Reverend Carroll and this is my wife Winnona. We just saw your lights from across the circle there, and thought we'd come over and greet you."

Smiling back at the Reverend with a flicker of irony in his eyes was yesteryear's face from Hicksville, high, a rural handiwork of national pride with hair a foot-and-a-half long knotted back like a Sumo wrestler's, and a long patterned wrap around, extending from waist to ankles in the Watusi ceremonial tradition.

"Pleased to meet you, Reverend, I'm Kerry and this is my wife Janet."

After asking, "What brings you all to these parts," the countenance of the Reverend and his wife dropped with regret when they heard it was the frizzy-haired holy man two miles down the road. But, of course, we too were familiar with the Bible verse concerning the prophet not honoured in his home-town. They needed, to be ushered, I felt, into a more universal understanding of the great truths, devoid of colloquial prejudices. And I silently fancied that such might be my private mission with them. To show them where Christ and Krishna converged.

Emerging out of the back door of the big house and joining our group was a self-proclaimed "four-foot dwarf from Brooklyn" with a satyr's smile and a voice like Edward G. Robinson. Mrs Winnona Carroll, a dignified but, by no means proud, white-haired lady with glasses, alert as an owl and glinting with keen-humoured goodwill, looked into Eddie's eyes while greeting him. His smile widened defiantly as he responded with "Sai Ram . . . Hare Krishna."

A sobering concern slightly eclipsed the smile of the Reverend's wife. Mrs Carroll opened the doors of their home any time. For a chat, for a meal, for help, or medical aid. "And I want all of you to know you are invited to our house for carols on Christmas eve. And there'll be treats too." She winked at Eddie who was somewhat pacified by her.

As the group bhajan-singer and spokesman, I made sure to extend the condition that God be honourd in universal measure. "And we'll share with you some of the songs we've learned." From out of the motley tribe of all manner of semi-actualized "gods" and "goddesses" surrounding the reverend and his wife came the assent of "Right on . . . tell it like it is. Say it, say it."

But when I saw Baba at darshan the next morning, my mellow lightness shattered under the bulldozer of his gaze. He ignored every one of us, walking past us in line without so much as a single look in our direction, barring a look at me. I felt about as significant as a cigarette butt. Feeling a threat to the very existence of my discipleship under him, and not knowing why, I forgot myself, went to his side courtyard as the others looked on, and stood by his side-door till he came out. He looked displeased. I moved closer to Baba and asked for his permission to enter into the forbidden territory like a peasant before King Ahasuerus; knowing that to come without being summoned could mean excommunication or death without the sceptre of favour being raised. Baba looked me up and down as though I had betrayed him.

Butterflies going wild in my stomach, I grabbed his hand, and implored to know what was wrong, and what I might do to right it, vowing certain and glad obedience.

Baba finally spoke, reconsidering his mood from displeasure to slow reluctant tolerance.

"Not good, all men and women living together. Now Indians think Americans bad devotees. Living like hippies." In grudging disappointment, "I never make on order, only give advice. *Bas.* It is always my advice that men and women separate."

"But Baba, most of them are married. Besides, we lived together in the first Kadugodi house, and there were no complaints. No impurity, Baba, strict Brahmacharya." I vouched. It went without saying among all of us that rule one, if one was at all serious about undertaking the *sadhana* for enlightenment under Baba, was no sex. And as far as I knew, there had not been any such instances.

"This tall Canadian man and girl in Puttaparthi living together," voice rising in incredulity, ". . . under one mosquito net on the proch. Not good. Indians seeing and talk bad things. Now is bad reflection on swami."

Realizing that Kerry and Janet were the ones, I rose to their defence. "But Baba, they are married, and have told me many times about their purity, brahmacharya."

"No sir, bad example. Now faith is spoiling." I felt fearful for them.

The next day Baba suddenly left to go to Goa in a long caravan of cars. We remained in Whitefield until Ed came running to our house with the latest news headline, stating that Baba had suddenly been hit with appendicitis in Goa. We departed immediately.

Finally we reached the governor's palace. The latest new reports were that Baba had burst his appendix. Pink and turquoise clouds curdled in the sky of the setting sun, while amber reflections from the sea below gave a scarlet tinge to the balcony. As we rounded a formation of military guard to the side of the mall, coming into full visibility of the residence, I now understood the reason for the concentrated quiet of everybody. Baba's red robe blazed from the balcony as though the penumbra of a divided sun bringing the orbit of our own journey into perfect timing. This was Baba's first public appearance since coming to Goa. I suspected he had got over his illness.

The moment we stepped into view, a welcoming wave from Baba confirmed our leap of faith in making the trip, leaving the assembly to wonder who such visitors could be to warrant the attention of such an exhalted figure as Baba who filled the headlines, and even had their governor at his beck and call. Nearby was the Governor, Nakul Sen, looking edgy and attentive as he held his hands prayerfully up to the true king of the palace. Baba withdrew, and news quickly circulated that as many as could fit were invited to an open gathering in the stately bhajan-hall. Uniformed servants tried to regulate the flow at the bottleneck of people pushing around, and up the wide burgundy-carpeted stairs.

As we reached the burnished teak and mahogany landing, an exuberant Kasturi standing beneath a large crystal chandelier, reached out to greet us. "Well, Mr Tal," he smiled eloquently, "I see Baba has brought you into his presence within the very hour of his healing. Go in, I think swami will say a few things about his sankalpa." The governor at the door of the darshan-hall, with his hand on my shoulder, directed us towards the front row. Raja quietly sank down next to me at the harmonium, squeezed my leg and smiled as I looked over. The feeling of welcome couldn't have been more timely for me.

Then an extremely vibrant Baba spoke, lifting our hearts right into the air. His splendid condition belied the fact that he had just overcome, merely an hour ago, a condition that meant certain death for virtually any "mortal." The reason: "I had to go to the rescue of a person who had surrendered to me—even his judgement. I took over his illness and went through it. His continued existence, in good health is desirable for the task dear to me. Pouring grace on the devout is one of the functions of the avatar. The abscessed appendix could only be cured by the doctors by removal. He could not have survived it, I know. I have come with this body in order to save other bodies from pain. This body is ever free from pain. Disease can never affect it." Baba went on to speak about divine providence, and the signs and wonders sometimes required to save mankind and draw it to the "Master of the World."

16

In the temperate shadow grey of five in the morning, Wendel and I slipped out of our bed-rolls on the rear terrace, and headed over several hundred feet of sand-dunes and beach to the shore, passing a number of large sows running about.

Through the twilight mist we wandered, passing effervescent sheets of cool spray. Gulls glinted in the sky above, and danced along the shoreline as flecks of silver. The far peninsula vanished into the distant haze, passing out through a charged grey tide of breakers rippling into the horizon.

It broke upon my fatigue—the residue of Andhra's prolonged wilderness—like a beam of light entering through a cellar door as my thinning frame stretched to sponge the vitality around me. Forty-five pounds less than when I came to India, my body took root in this balmy clime like a stubborn weed, not unmindful of its former prowess. Already less sluggish, aches leaving, and kinks in bone joints gone, I gladdened at the prospect of regeneration.

Shafts of the golden dawn suddenly streamed from behind the tall palms lining the shore, dyeing the sea an emerald green.

I began to smile within. Then it burst out all over my features.

I could hardly contain myself. My God, I was happy. I felt like running through the surf. So I did. I felt like jumping into the foam. I did, and so did Wendel. And then, I rolled and tumbled, and dived through acres of foam as though it were the very doors of paradise; a place, a thing, or a state of being that my soul, sometimes in broken-hearted beseeching, other times with wrenching anguish, and yet, at other times, rejoicing in the very knowledge thereof, had been striving for all my life to find.

And then after about fifteen minutes, or five minutes, my jubilation subsided. A part of my soul, in sober silence, was shedding tears. It was only a mirage that I had been rejoicing in, lasting no more than the spume which soon vanishes; far from the heaven of eternality, incorruptible perfection, bliss, and ineffable communion with God. And this was where my understanding soon clouded.

That evening, at the Cabo Raj Nivas, we arrived as the crowd was dispersing from a rather brief darshan. Baba was soon to give special audience to the team of doctors who had diagnosed him, but whom he would not permit to perform any kind of operation.

On the verandah, sitting at a wrought iron table was an immaculately dressed man in a vest and tie with his opulently adorned wife.

I trooped in, leaned on the chair and smiled.

"Do join us please and take the chair. We are just waiting for a call from Sai Baba."

I gave him a fairly standard introduction. The response was, "How incredible. My heavens." He wasn't being facetious. Standing behind me, he could see a motley crew of circus freaks with Wendel towering over all of them.

"I just didn't think this sort of a thing was possible," Dr Varma, Surgeon-General of Goa, confessed with a refined accent. "You know, I went to the Medical School at Cambridge University, and soon became infected with what they called a "healthy western skepticism." Well, since that time, I have dismissed all these rumours of miraculous accounts among certain holy men as just superstition. In fact, I scorned them. Now, I'm just too amazed. I feel as though I have to start all over again in thinking through what is reality." I nodded slowly. Then asked him to relate the details of the whole episode.

Baba played cat and mouse with the doctors, bringing them to a crescendo of anxious medical certainty that he was going to die, if he refused an operation once more.

When Baba left Goa to continue his tour to Bombay, we were so caught up in the drama of being with Baba on tour that we followed.

On 22 December after a wind swept night on deck with cat-naps interspersing our cross-talk, we pulled into the dark Bombay docks at about five a.m. Several hours later, we bussed to the Central Train Terminus, had breakfast, then took the commuter train to the Bombay suburb of Andheri out beyond the Santa Cruz airport, miles and miles of middle class hi-rises, and the giant brackish marshlands of sewage conduits and tin can and cardboard shantis bridged over by the Bombay freeways.

We arrived at Baba's massive Dharmakshetra complex in Andheri, with crews of workers working twenty-four hours a day getting the reception-hall and stage ready for the coming festival.

Not long afterwards, as Wendel and I watched the Seva Dal crew walking on the stage design of the super-stage, Kasturi appeared, calling over the present chairman of the team. In a trice, I was elected head of organization and logistics and Wendel was the head artist and designer. Hearing about Wendel's ability, the former chairman stepped down graciously pledging us his full cooperation and support. And it so happened that such support was more abundant than either of us would have dreamed.

The youthful energetic, almost mediterranean-featured man, who talked almost like "GI Joe," happened to be Umong Mathur, one of the largest contracting and building magnates in the land whose empire encompassed a total monopoly on construction equipment. "From Bombay to Delhi to Calcutta to Madras, all construction equipment has to come from one of my assemblies. When we get the parts from Germany, we put them together over there, a few miles away. I have really big hangars to do it in. You name it and we have got it, bulldozers, catterpillars, cranes, jack-hammers, steam-rollers, steam-shovels, cement-mixers, air-compressors, and the lot. See this huge auditorium, we cleared it out, levelled it, landscaped it, brought in the crushed rock, everything." While he was trying to talk to three people at the same time, Umong waved his chauffer to come up the drive. Almost pleading with us not to refuse, he then handed us two crisp hundred rupee notes to purchase any art materials Wendel might need, and asked what he might do while we were gone.

We rejoiced down the highways and suburbs into the city, lounging in the spacious car, leaning out of the window, and marvelling how the tables of providence had flipped for the umpteenth time since we had left Whitefield.

Yet, if we had arrived as urchins only to be given the keys to the great city of Bombay, we had yet another battle, the lusts of the eye and the waywardness of the mind. A strange omnious sense rippled my mood for a second as I scanned a desolate garbage strewn along the highway, bordered by blackened apartment buildings. Circling high in the air in wide arcs, wings six feet wide, dotting rooftops, and hopping around refuse and dog carcasses were a number of black, scaled bony vultures. Wandering through this blighted region were two Shaivite sadhus with tridents, yard long knotted hair, ochre rags, and a chalky powder covering their features.

During darshan, before the long afterwards with Wendel and the stage crew, I strolled outside amidst hundreds of bhajans screaming over the loudspeakers and fifteen thousand voices echoing back, passing several tea shanties, where I finally stopped a few hundred feet away at the barbed-wirefence surrounding Dharmakshetra. Other than a large open field packed with cars, and cars lining the small road, the area was quite barren except for another modern architectural wonder nearby, the Christian Mission Hospital. Conscious that it was Christmas Eve, I needed to be alone and dispassionately reflect for a while. Augmenting my mood of dispassion was a general disgust with "outward appearances" in general and Baba's form in particular. This may have derived as a subtle training tactic of Baba's. I wasn't sure. But at times, I wondered if the paradoxical fusion of beauty and gaudiness—or even bestiality—in Baba's features wasn't some higher riddle of sublimity. That at a certain period in sadhna, the aspirant, having been once pulled by the sweetness, but now more and more offended by the gaudiness or insufficiency, is forced to reject Baba's form as a self-negating puzzle in order to only then see the fuller nature of godhead underneath. Certainly, Baba had often warned his followers not to become fixated sentimentally on his form, and that to do so would be the fateful mistake that would preclude their ever really knowing who he was.

As I leaned on the fence, I was suddenly confronted with a scene that reminded me of the "Golden Cactus" in Reno Nevada. Sitting on the elevated landscape with the monstrous full moon just above it, was a brightly lit object that fully resembled a flying saucer about to take off from a landing-site. Then from the pit of my stomach came the logical question to ask on a Christmas Eve. "If Christ were here in this century, would he live in something that looked like a fiying saucer on a launch pad?"

As an ocean of voices echoed out of the sky, I could not decide whether the object on the hill was awesome in some strange way or just another modern architectural fungoid affronting all good taste. The large double-storied elliptical cement wonder was alternately glowing green and red by hidden lighting, paling the full moon. With a thousand and eight separate facets, it represented the thousand and eight petalled lotus of the gods. Indeed, every aspect about the structure had numerological significance: the main oak doors with the religious symbols of world religions, the gem-like facets of the walls, the moat surrounding it, the ramp leading over the moat, the beacons, the symbols and murals inside, and the large overhanging arachnidic windows at the very top.

Then, as I stood on the Mahakali Road in all the fanfare of bhajans and crowd shuffling, I suddenly saw this Being in a brilliant red robe step on to the platform of the flower. And there the little man, whose head of hair resembled another large blossomed out of this Cyclopean flower while radiating some phosphorescent other-worldly light. The crowd went dead silent.

Afterwards, still bemused and not necessarily in the Christmas spirit nor particularly elated, I sat glassy-eyed in a wooden tea-shack sipping tea, while trying to peel away the next developmental layer of the psychic onion-skin. On tour, this kind of mental homework was often neglected, I quietly conceded to myself.

17

What had weighed on our minds as of late was a certain letter that Ed had received from Chris a day or two back. In plain simple language, the group in Whitefield was hurtling into confusion, and schisming, with a whole number suddenly about to go off by themselves. In another letter before New Year, more details tabulated. Bette and Michelle, to escape the chaos of the girl's house—themselves seduced like all the others into pot-smoking—went off to a famous Baba devotee's house in Madras. Jnani moved to a separate room near the movie house, apparently still smoking pot. India and Marsha fled to the simplicity of the main ashram back in Puttaparthi. And word was also out that the fellows at the Blake cabin had all but abandoned ship.

Their last moment of group togetherness was at Reverend Ivan Carroll's, of all places, on the Christmas Eve. From all reports, it had actually been a brief interlude of relief and contentment, if not joy, for many of them. Forgetting themselves, they all sang Christmas carols and made themselves at home in a genuine American household with chairs, tables, dressers, a couch or two, bric-a-brac, a piano, and regular toilets. But what really gave it that down-home flavour, out in the middle of nowhere, was a midnight snack of gingerbread cookies, cakes, ice-cream, hot cocoa, and pumpkin pie.

But most of us at Dharmakshetra wondered in retrospect if those at the Carrolls hadn't been in an emotional confusion, perhaps promulgated finally over two different forms of the same God. I privately speculated that perhaps their sudden witness of the love of Christ (a new thing among many of them who were Jews)—and we were all willing to admit it was real—divided them needlessly. Or perhaps, they were answering back to Baba's neglecting them.

The sudden arrival of a distraught and despairing Victoria, thin as a broomstick and wearing a dark blue sari, was a fearful omen that the seeds of light in our own community were not taking roots properly. And if the seeds weren't growing properly right under the direct radiance of Baba then what chance did those myriads of seeds in America have who never come closer to Baba than within a mile or two?

The same Vickie whom I met under the "tree of wisdom" at Puttaparthi a year back, the companion to the handsome young Englishman, Anthony, who was now exiled in Malta, was wearing her bravest chin-up expression, but it didn't last. When I escorted her past the sentry gate, the modern complex all completely new to her, up the flower-lined drive to the base of the ramp, she soon began to waver as Baba came out of the door, down the ramp, and stood with us at the base.

A look, bordering on inquisitive impatience, flickered across Baba's face. I could almost feel Vickie's mind leap back in alarm, catching itself at the precipice of a huge fall, "No Baba, not that reaction, not that. No, you're supposed to . . . right now . . . don't you know?. . ."

Vickie stumbled through the story, frantically dropping cutlery and battling with her food. Bruce, Peter, Benno, Martin, Kerry, and Janet, and Vickie had held nightly get-togethers in Whitefield. Apparently, they had been having many similar perceptions and doubts about Baba. Then grievances were aired, along with feelings about India in general. The blight became an epidemic, one rotten apple had spoiled the barrel, and all of them became alienated not only from Baba but from one another. Each was proceeding along his own course. But just before complete ruination, Vickie, too weak to hold it on her own, repented. What the others had said about Baba just could not be true. She had to get away from the other backsliders as quickly as possible, leave India, and think things out again in the quiet of Dorset or Malta, or wherever she was driven.

How sad to have been with Baba for a year now, and leave by such ignoble means, no stronger in faith, and not visibly any more upbuilt than the day she and Anthony alighted upon Puttaparthi. But when all else failed, all other foundations collapsed, Vickie could clutch at the diminishing microbe of her first love, faith in Baba. And like a marriage vow, she would faithfully hold on to this if nothing else endured, and all else perished. Namely, a great generalized hope, above the strata of particulars, just an airy cumulus cloud of blind faith, fully divorced from materiality, circumstance, historicity, logic, and the whiles of the mind, and, therefore, free of attack from lies and inconsistencies. The final resolution had to be that the dance of life must go on at all costs, above the world.

What about marriage to Anthony in respect of Baba's prophecy? Oh, the vicissitudes of the world would take care of themselves came the reply, in the tone of one brought up in aristocracy, yet with equal self-abasement to nullify that familiar class pride. Accustomed to estates and manor-houses in Essex and London, nursemaids since childhood, and the English easy life of gentry such as her parents and other lords and ladies, Vickie now had her own trust fund from the family estate that would insure her from ever having to worry about the struggles and inconveniences of living. I wondered if this rather inviting door, always open to her, combined with the soft life of her past, had gotten the better of her. Heavens no!

Vickie left in a whirl and we stayed until Baba's tour had come to an end. By the time we were on our way back to Whitefield, we had been gone for a month and a half, four weeks in Bombay and two in Goa.

18

"Pah, cracks, all cracks" the hard face of god declared; a tone of wounded anger resembled a father disinheriting a recalcitrant son. Across the Brindavan darshan line, as we arrived, was a sad collection of faces. The unfaithful long crippled western remnant now deep in shame. Facing us on the girl's side was a motley of pale faces with quivering mouths, making it evident that they were slowly dying inside and now looking back pitifully at Baba.

Baba hurried up to me and continued, "Faith of others now complete ruin. Your group, all rockets, go to Puttaparthi now. Stay separate. Soon, I'm coming also. Huhhhh?" "Yes, Baba." He abruptly left back towards private gate, passing the others without a glimmer of recognition.

Now that exclusion from Baba's presence was imminent on them, the question of even a tolerant glance from Baba was beyond measure, say nothing of the original hope that Baba would chase them around with tears in his eyes so common with penitent parents who have ignored their children for far too long.

After Baba's command, we were on our way to Puttaparthi in a rented car. Baba's absence expanded from several days following our arrival to several weeks. The old hangers-on at Whitefield would be ignored by Baba while new arrivals from Hilda's group in New York would first reach Baba at Brindavan, be embraced as long lost children, and then sent up to the main ashram where we would welcome them warily.

Even with the coming Mahasivaratri festival, some would continue to remain in Whitefield, Anne and Arnie among them. They would perhaps search their hearts in Baba's absence.

The hard line holdovers who either never went to Whitefield in mid-November or returned soon, I looked at for signs of change. India and Marsha conveyed that they had grown in grace, serence through the hardships of the scanty diet and local inactivity. Now they almost dreaded the arrival of boisterous "worldly" New Yorkers with fast city vibes, hang-ups, and hustle.

Sandy and Zolt had taken a different turn. She was the same, ever resembling a thinned sparkling water-nymph, though perhaps sparkling less. Zolt, before resembling a Bruegel medieval peasant and rivalling Will for the dubious distinction of the simple-simon or village idiot archetype, had the latter strain in his features enhanced. And what did it was a new emaciated, knock-kneed, watery-eyed pride that spoke of an ostentatious self-denial bordering on torture. The prematurely wizened Zolt would now be escorted around the ashram with the same vacant stare as those in sanatoriums, while Sandy could take pride in holding up her own budding little rishi and vedic ascetic. He needed his bared rib cage a little bonier and a slightly larger walking stick to resemble Ramana Maharishi.

From now on, only a few of the girls would get to use the usual cubicle reserved for the girls in the long row facing the luxury suites; India, Marsha, Sandy, the pregnant Barbara, and several shinning recent arrivals from New York. The hangers-on and "cracks" would arrive and start congregating like bedouin wanderers along the far end of the ashram, some along the roof and more so later at Kasturi's bidding. Everyone remembered Gill's post-card six months back from his thatched hut in Udipi Taluk along the Malabar Coast.

When it was rumoured after two and a half weeks since we left Whitefield that Baba's car was finally coming—a hot line phone call from Brindavan to the phone in the ashram postmaster's office to Kasturi—a wild plan of reconciliation was thought out in the turbulent short hours following the call. More than likely the kernel of the idea came through an inner voice as many of them, now somewhat removed from the heart of the ashram, turned to signs and inward psychic channels to reaffirm their closeness to Baba. The surface rejection was to test the metal of their faith in the ever constant love of Baba. And it had come because they were now test worthy in their walk.

In the hustle and bustle of the final hour, six or seven of them skipped, walked and ran out the side gate holding hands and beaming knowingly with a new found exuberance. Down the barren road, they would hurry, running for a stretch, swaying a bit, skipping again, and marching with flowers in their hair, lapels, and bunched up in their hands, as children bearing forth their true playfulness. For this, enviable childish spontaneity was a hallmark of essential purity and innocence. It showed that their inward nature was without blemish. The fornications of the past were just passing clouds over the clear moon of the eternal atma.

But after the ashram had settled with Baba's speedy arrival, they slinked back through the gate looking as though they were about to die. In quiet humiliation on the roof-top they bathed one another's wounds, looked for reinforcement, and quietly knew that if their position had been tenuous before, now it was critical. The details of the episode emerged in gulping confessions.

In the final lap of the journey, Baba's car edged around that one narrowing section of road clustered by trees on both sides. Meeting him head-on was a human roadblock, daisy-chained across the road, smiling, singing and prancing, now jumping up and down in jubilation as the car strained to a dead stop. Inches in front of the bumper, the ringleader gazed through the windshield with a goofy grin plastered across his face. The gleeful girls, giggled, shrieked, and praised, adorning the car with flower petals, while the human tentacle wrapped around the car. Now for Baba's forgiving delight.

The window rolled down, two black orbs radiating back fury. Then came the judgement, tearing up the air with the force of a sonic boom rippling out in waves of blackened light. "Pssssttt. Foreign cracks get out of the way. Go away from Puttaparthi, acting like hippies not my bhaktas. Go. Get out."

The car sped on. Exuberance turned to wrenching despair. The inner message had betrayed them, and now they stood doubled up feeling like something in them had been torn out like a rotten onion-skin.

On the roof, an infuriated Kasturi attempted to carry out Baba's command of eviction. They lay back and moaned. If it came to it, they would have to be dragged away to the fence where they would lie and die rather than leave.

If the new Americans had come effervescing like bottled California sunshine, a plump Bombay girl, from prominent family of one of india's more internationally known film producers, spearheaded the arrival. Tatu commanded sufficient charisma and eloquence to soon take over the somewhat emotionally bankrupt rooftop community, as none other than "the rooftop prophetess" and maintain psychic channel to the very heart of Baba. Her activities would soon sweep the roof bringing to the other members the fascination of a games room discovered by a wandering hoard of bored tourists aboard an ocean liner. Doubtless I would wonder whether she had had a hand in "guiding" the others to meet Baba's returning car out on the road. In the meantime, instead of the wasteland of exiles that the roof was supposed to be, it hummed and crackled with messages from the higher Baba, proving that theirs was the greatest access to the coveted master. Soon, a small group of followers would be selected as sufficiently annointed to share Tatu's most cryptic confidences. All but one of them from the new arrivals.

Even though Kasturi, by Baba's command, would proceed to order Tatu as being off limits, the inner circle knew that it was merely a high-test designated for the final unshacklings preceding enlightenment in so stupendous a soul. In the dead of night, the spirit voices had hinted more than once that hers was to be a great mission, and none but the "three American sisters" knew it. And they weren't about to tell.

But just when many of the Westerners seemed irreparably alienated, Baba suddenly called everyone into an interview. Before him was a crowd of vulnerable and broken people. And any word of kindness, at this point, would endear these lost people to Baba forever. And those words came . . . .

"Many of you coming on a long journey to India, taking many risks, going through many difficulties. For many years searching, searching for love. You did not get mother's love in American families. See, American family is divided. Selffish. Each person thinking of himself, not his duty. Not good, very bad. Parents in

America give many material articles but no *prema*, no love. I am speaking of human love, not divine love. Human love far less, but still important. Without human love child is like a plant without water, withers. Growing up hurting, angry, even hating parents. These are sears. Indian family different. In India, there are large families, growing together many generations, all members; fathers, grandfathers, sometimes great-grandfathers, uncles, mothers, grandmothers, many relatives. Not separating from home at twenty years like in America. Members in Indian families are loyal, very dependent. The child is moulded better. He is obedient and takes pride in pleasing his family. Very afraid of displeasing parents with moral sin. Moral sin selfish. If he is bad, the whole family suffers. Yes, his mistake tarnishes the family name, and all suffer with his mistake. But all over America is complete immorality."

"You come here for love . . . the mother's love you missed? I love you more than a thousand mothers. And a thousand times more than your mother."

There was a long pause, the silence welling underneath with choked emotion. "This is also a privilege, because this is divine love. God's love."

Baba gave us a long, searching look. "I would give my blood for you." Many of the girls from the old contingent started sniffling. I just squeezed Baba's foot, and looked up with contrite gratitude as his gaze seemed to envelope me in on oozing nectar. "Yes, I also need your love."

The interview ended with many people in tears. Baba's mercy seemed overwhelning. Yet there was no telling when the next interview would come. Within days Baba would be moving back to Whitefield, and that meant the uncertain shift of the Westerners, who would be hunting houses again. The weeks seemed to speed by.

19

On the night of 27 February, a Saturday, the cab taking us on the final stretches of the journey, from the central Bangalore bus terminus out through the twelve miles of countryside to the quiet little town of Whitefield, stopped on the large circular park in front of the "Major's house," where all ten of us had stayed before the Goa trip. Our only choice was the Blake cabin out in the open fields over a mile away, an impossible target for an ordinary car, considering the rivetted boulder strewn across the approach road.

Then, sure enough, what I feared most, happened. The light coming from the back of the big house revealed that the once bare rooms had been filled with furniture. I checked all the doors, running around the house in the nippy air as Ed soon found out from the Anglo-Indian student rabble next door, smoking and playing poker in their little cabin, that some "blokes" just started moving in the day before. We declined their invitation to join their little party.

From out of the chilly darkness, a slow inspiration dawned on me as I caught the yonder light emerging out of Carroll's frosted windows. Something I hadn't banked on as an alternative.

Indeed, I had all but forgotten the two missionaries whom I had seen only once on that one November day when they came over to Kerry and Janet's cabin to invite us all over for Christmas carols. The breadth of their offer, should we ever have any needs, came to mind.

Ed and Surya Das noticed me caught up in thought as I tentatively moved in the direction of their house. "You all guard the luggage, I think I've got the answer," I yelled back.

What concerned me as I went through the gate was the delicateness of the moment. Above all, I reminded myself, more important than the favour I sought was that one spiritual block would be facing another: the broad and subtle path to God with its resilient brilliance facing that ever so faithful remnant of "straight and narrow wayers" whose relentless grip on the hem of that one avatar, Jesus Christ, was of such magnitude that for me to march in upon their own encampment and split that bond asunder—so that they might acquiesce to the God-hood of more than that one single Messiah—would be a spiritual victory of titanic proportions. Perhaps sensing the weight of this, my spirit welled up within as though nervous before battle, and seeking full breath of air available before the doorbell was answered. To be sure, we needed no help from them; if we had to, we could brave the chilly air in the little park, for Baba's abundance was always with us. And so that they gain no special sense of false victory, it was imperative that this come across.

"Hi," I projected with stout-hearted abandon as the door swung open revealing the two clear eyes of Mrs Carroll beaming back warmly behind a plain pair of glasses. Then another face popped into view more or less through the crack along the top of the door, grinning down good-naturedly at me. "Well, Hello. Come on in, we were just thinking about you." It was Reverend Ivan smiling like Jimminy Cricket.

Within a minute my plan was in effect. Soon after, Ed and Surya Das emerged out of the blackness into the porchlight, perhaps resembling the Carrolls that less than wholesome seediness of two Mexican Banditos in waiting. On up the path they smiled, Ed somewhat impishly and Surya Das as transcendentally as ever. Inside the house, the Carroll's Indian helper had all but reset the dining room table, having already put out three cups of hot steaming chocolate. We mutually nodded to shelve the debate on higher truth till the food, soon out on the table, was disposed of.

The table scene must have at times resembled the tenor of W.C. Fields as Dr Quack lodging in with the good old simple folk in, "Pioneer Days Is Here Again." A trickle of spiritual banter was maintained, no matter how overpowering the next bite of food was, putting in evidence our true ascetic will power.

Playing in the background, I heard for the first time, in any depth, the first traces of classical music since coming to India.

As I opted for an excerpt of Wagner, and sank into an armchair, Mrs Carroll asked Eddie, among that generation to come following her exodus from America into the mission fields, what sort of music he liked.

A wry smile disengaged an imaginary Havana, he looked over to her, and responded, "Ya, ever hear of 'Aqua Lung' by Jethro Tull?"

"No, can't say I have. I'm sure you all listen to brands of music that we don't even know exist," Mrs Carroll responded diplomatically.

Ivan finally broke his long stare off through the ceiling, and said, "Reckon it's time for us all to hit-the-hay. In this house though, we generally have a moment of prayer with the Lord before turning in. Are you folks averse to joining us?"

"Oh no, not at all," came our unified response.

As the two missionaries prayed, the light key feeling of the evening went away, bringing in a quiet might of conviction, a power I found to be most baffling. Another finger than that of Baba pointed to the secrets of my heart, exposing thoughts and attitudes in a different light from the standpoint of holiness that would have no yolking with what I called the negative polarity. Distantly, this quality of love with whom the Carrolls seemed so familiar, suggested that unpleasant notion of my own unworthiness, how far short of perfection I was in terms of . . . well, some kind of Godly standard. This was an experience that I found to be the most radical, especially since coming to India where it was nowhere to be found. Some deep foundations in me were shaking.

It seemed some fiber of consciousness in me, something I had incorporated as part of my being, sensed being near the fulcrum of a possible oblivion. The belief in the ocean of temporal relativity had to either engulf the opposing bacterium of thought or be devoured itself. A resolve soon mounted in me to stockpile my own spiritual arsenal for the morrow.

As the Reverend and his wife escorted us down the hall to the main guest room, they urged all of us to unabashedly feel at home, that what was here was not theirs but the Lord's, property of all. In certain ways, we reminded them of when their son Dale was with them. A picture atop a dresser revealed a large athletic blond fellow in glasses with short hair and strong eyes, the ideal son of devotion, integrity, and thoroughbread moral character, what Eddie would call a "straight cat."

Eddie grabbed the adjacent room, the laundry room which had a small cot. Naturally, we insisted on sleeping on the floor while unrolling our mats over the rugs. Perhaps, we thought we might convict them of their sin of sleeping on beds when other people slept on the floor. It might have even occurred to Eddie to drive the point home by curling up in the washing machine. Yogis just didn't need beds. We knew that the only way of escape from the prison of maya was to divorce oneself from all sensuality. But our explanation didn't put them to shame about their excesses. They were rather amused at high-sounding nonsense, and I felt like the infantile martyr who insists upon eating out of a dog's bowl, while the others sit at a table; the same food mind you, but rather in the corner, slurping, where one can look morosely around at those feasting at a table. Those who would dare feast, while you undergo such hardship in the name of truth.

"Did I ever tell you about grand-daddy?" butted in Surya Das. "He was hornier than a bull toad. Used to keep dirty pictures hidden around the house. Talked to me about girls sometimes. If grandma ever got wind of it I 'spect she woulda just about died. But no wonder. Hell, I doubt if they'd boned-out even once in twenty years. I tell you," Surya Das chortled, "he was hurtin'. Sometimes when I used to lie awake late at night I'd hear him callin' down the hall, 'Thelma . . . Thelma.' And a weary voice would answer back, 'Aw what is it George?' And there'd be a long silence, and then grand-daddy would think of somethin.' 'Uhhh, what time did you say that picnic was tomorrow?' And she'd answer back, 'Come on George, 4.30. Now I was practically asleep.' Half an hour later it'd start up all over again. I'd hear, 'Thelma . . . Thelma.' Sour as a lemon, she'd ask, 'What is it this time George?' And he'd answer back 'Aw uhhh, never mind . . . uhhh.' It was pathetic. Sometimes, they'd do this back and forth five or six times. If that's what their religion does to them, it ain't right. Who'd ever want to marry an old prune like that anyway.

Hell, I'd a kicked her out of the house years ago if I were him . . . why stand for it . . . he was just yeller. If she can't even put-out, what good is she? Certainly, there's no earth-changing magic in their company. I'd prefer a dog, at least they're cheerful."

"Yup, I know what you mean. Boon-docks consciousness. She wants it just as bad, but manoeuvre the poor dude into playing the dirty man who initiates the thing again and again till she approves, does a noble deed, and then she comes out still wearing white robes. Her whole concept of sin connected with marital sex is perverted. I don't even think its Christian to be honest. It's a pride number. But she'll get burned for such hypocricy in the long run, not realizing how karma's retroactive. No way you can hide your thoughts from God." Surya Das agreed with me.

"There's probably a special astral hell for all those who engage in sexual blackmail."

"Yeah, all that damned up horniness of a lifetime consumes them, while they get stuck with some wet noodle who reads the cosmic Well Street Journal all day and night and doesn't even want to talk." We both laughed.

"The thing about celibacy over here in India is that it isn't vindictive. The Hindus do it more than we do, but they understand why they're doing it. They're abstaining out of a sense of higher love, that's why. They're transmuting that energy," Surya Das concluded.

The conversation trickled off as I sank into one of the most untroubled and refreshing sleeps I had had in a long time. The bed itself, for a body now adjusted to straw-mats and cement floors, reminded me of a cloud.

At 7 I reluctantly woke up, seeing the gentle dawn across the curtains. Then I became conscious of sounds emerging out of the living room. First low mumbling, then a motley of Indian and American voices singing hymns, then both of the Carrolls speaking in subdued tones. Then a flowing music soon to follow caught me up in a lazy reflection. I didn't have that edgy sense of alienation from the world or confusion of thought I so often did at the comparable hour on the ashram when I would awake to a music that would also flow and echo in mysterious twists, the unfailing melodious voice of Vijaya contorting and whining through the beautiful but sad scales of the *Suprabhattam*.

Soon after, Mrs Carroll's hand gently rapped on the door to alert us for breakfast. They would be off to perform church duties.

And we would be going about our business of finding a place. The remnant of the Sunday school, Indians of all ages, gleamed when we appeared, only to suddenly look disappointed upon hearing of our discipleship to Baba. Some of them had been Baba devotees.

Within another hour or two we foreclosed the possibility of other disciples beating us to the Blake cabin. We had tea with Mrs Blake, an old Anglo-Indian woman, and bantered about colonial days when the British knew how to run things before the insufferable weight of the nation would buckle under political and economic pandemonium and corruption. Then we inspected the musty dust-covered rooms of antiques stacked up, one atop another, like caskets in a crypt. The main farmhouse was very much run down, indicating clearly the reason for Mrs Blake's acute interest in a spotpayment on the rent. Yet, next to the stone and mortar hut we were renting a hundred feet away in the wide expanse of thorns, rocks, and ragged wilderness of boulders and hills, and flat rocks and oddly shaped trees bent in some terrible beauty, the main farmhouse looked like a mansion. On top of the entrance of the little hut was the remnant of words that Gill had scrawled crudely with chalk, "Shanti Kutir," or abode of peace, which belied everything it seemed to finally become for Gill in tragic irony.

By Sunday dinner that evening, Ivan had preached an evening sermon at the handsome stone church across the circle, and the visitors were feeling a little more rooted now that we had our own place awaiting us. But after hour conversation in the living room wasn't light key for long. Evidently, the Carrolls had some kind of burden for us. And I was no less zealous that the truth not be maligned by well-intentioned prejudice that might interfere in some deep way with the Carrolls' acceptance of Baba, whose name equally with Christ, meant truth, only in Sanskrit.

The living room oozed with power as the circle of faces looked at each successive speaker as he contributed his most forceful argument in the vital struggle for ascendency of the two opposing blocks of belief. Both of them could not be true at the same time: either we could successively synthesize "A" with "Non-A" or "A" would be right in its stubborn affirmation that it was intellectual schizophrenia to link it with "Non-A." In other words, "either we can encompass you as we have always said we could or you were right after all that we could not. If it's all one, we can engulf you, Christian or not, but if you can keep us from engulfing you, then it is not all one."

First, the formidable task of the Bible I thought as I looked at the rock determination behind their eyes. After all I proposed, was not the "Logos" an eternal principle forever repeating itself in a multitude of contexts? And was not the entire written account of this Logos an allegory of truth too exalted to articulate by its overt examples? Namely, there had to be a yin-yang theme in the Garden of Eden, I formulated to myself. They disagreed to the very foundations of their personalities.

So what. We had no trouble with either the supernatural or miracles, that was old hat to us, we saw them every day. We already knew that Christ was legitimate, so what were they getting at? Didn't they know that the cosmic mind could easily work out so complex a scheme, accurate to the very final atom?

Then was scripture infallible they asked me. Oh sure, the God who can hold the North Star in the heavens can easily preserve all scripture, be it the Bible or the *upanishads.*

Indeed, He could provide that scripture not be adulterated through the ages, but let us make sure exactly what that scripture is, they recommended, pointing to one Christ and one incident of incarnation.

Agreed, I said, that Christ was a person in history as much in the flesh as Tiberius or Xerxes, and more historically substantiated than any single human being of antiquity by all legal-historical criteria. But he was also the cosmic Christ, having incarnated before as an absolute principle, and as such, he has touched all scripture in all forms.

Where does it say that, they asked? Surya Das, smiling like the noble savage, interjected with his wealth of Indian lore. Why the Yacqui Indians, the Aztecs and, at least, one other tribe had all seen the appearances of the "Great Master in White." Joseph Smith of the Mormons also said bluntly that Christ had appeared to the Indians in America. Besides, I now continued, Cayce in his readings from the Akasic records, the skeen of the cosmic mind, unearthed a long genealogy of Christ's past incarnations; for instance, his appearance as Melchizidek. Besides, Levi, who like Cayce went into the cosmic mind to write "The Aquarian Gospel," a gospel more revealing for this age due to the higher evolution of souls, endorsed all of Cayce's observations agreeing especially on the unknown years of Christ, from age twelve to thirty, where Christ sojourned to the East as part of his training as a master. And where could there be a greater theme of unification than to have Christ share in the spiritual wealth of the East?

The Carrolls observed that it was a dubious wealth of which an army of saints could still spend forever picking up the pieces of wretched humanity, but go on.

Christ learned healing in Benares, transmutation under a master in the Himalayas, and in Tibet he went under the highest initiates only to transcend them. When he was ready, he returned to Israel.

For one thing, if it's all one, why didn't Christ just remain in India, he could have just as easily taught from there. Likewise, does it not seem possible that rather than the wise men of the East coming to train Christ, they had actually been indicated to show Christ's redemptive plan as a sign of salvation to even the people on the far distant end of the earth, coming to enlighten gentiles and pagans as well as the children of Israel. Was it not God who promised Abraham that all the earth would be blessed through his seed? Their masters were not sufficient in the East, otherwise these wise men would not have come to seek the promised One. And how interesting that not once, throughout the New Testament, does Christ make reference to any of the standard Eastern concepts of pantheism.

Also, one of the Carrolls continued, if you're going to pick and choose what is, and what is not scripture, you are making yourself the final authority for adjudicating truth, which is to say you are viewing yourself as being on par with any of the writers of scripture therefore qualified to write your own edition. And if each man can do that, there is nothing left. We may as well throw in the writings of Edgar Allan Poe and every science fiction writer that ever lived and say that each has invented a valid cosmology. And if you do that, needless to say, there will be a spaghetti of contradictions. Under the authority of such a web of deception, you will become irretrievably lost to wander into deeper delusion.

While the Carrolls pressed home this theme of a standard, the argument amplified in my mind. Mrs Carroll observed that if our basis for judgement was a private inner experience of intuition, well, experiences contradicted. Still, what standard could I, in turn, use to discern the false from the true, the counterfeit prophet from the genuine article? For, did I not realize that the Bible repeatedly tells of coming counterfeit spokesmen of God, awesome in their subtle arguments? How could I, on my own, supporting myself by my own intellectual bootstraps, summon the relentless standard to judge between the two? Was there some magic about me, as though given an impunity above deception by divine favour, that made it such that practically all other men could be prone to deception but me Tal Brooke? No, no, I was too democratic in belief to do other than rank myself in the general family of man, when such questions emerge I would not, at this moment, venture to go that far. That I had a special edge above other men, yes, but let us not pursue that theme now. But it's a fair universe, ain't it? I countered in my most humble, ruralite, family-of-man voice.

Behind the question, the Zen Master of my intellect was detached from the arena of conflict as it carefully watched the chessboard for openings. In a sense, each pawn was that precise persona within me that would most persuasively manipulate the realm of ideation to edge them into the next square. Having an empire of personalities within me, all things to all men, if you will, I had a sufficient resource of cunning to bring it off. Then, at that acute unsuspecting moment, such thought Koans as, ' What is the sound of one-hand clapping? . . . What was your original face?" had destroyed the mind-defenses of many a pupil, making him to see God at that precise moment of enlightenment in the ordinary face of a rishi. A mere slanty-eyed little man with a shaved skull donning an ochre robe. To bring this off, however, I needed more than ever to surrender to the Tao, the indwelling Baba, as a guide, always a step ahead of the rational thought.

I now answered why it was a fair universe. We can adjudicate scripture, I proposed, because we have the perfect light of God within, and that becomes our touch-stone of truth to test everything. As we evolve spiritually, we gain in intuitive wisdom to enable us further to see beyond the mazes of life. Thus, perfect inner intuition-wisdom is the standard, because the highest scripture is written in the skeen of the overself, deep within. Easy.

Meanwhile, my question still hung potently in the air. "It's a fair universe, ain't it?"

"Insofar that God would that none should perish, but have everlasting life through his son, Jesus Christ," came the answer directly from the New Testament. "But this does not mean that we are free to adulterate God's Truth to suit us. Dictating reality just to suit our whims. That's like the child who refuses to get out of bed one morning, because the world does not conform to his wish of being made out of candy cone-houses and streets. He can lie in bed forever, yet never change what is, nor blackmail the Creator into obediently dusting up creation to suit his fancies. As humbling as it sounds, we have no choice but to accept what is."

The mighty weight of truth that they went on to suggest is that man in his unredeemed state not only stands in eternal judgement, far from the holy presence of God separated by a gulf of sin as wide as the universe, but because of this, is at enmity with God to the extent of being numbered among the adversary. The stupendous thing about God's grace to fallen and imperfect man; merely a created creature and no more, is that it would yet be so broad and deep as to love man in his sins to the extent of formulating the perfect riddle of bailing him out of an impossible predicament, while at the same time, fully satisfying a perfect standard of justice and love. Fully a mystery so deep as to baffle all the hosts of the universe, Cherubim and all. And that riddle was the space-time incarnation of the Logos into the long predicted Messiah, Jesus Christ, fully in the flesh of whom even Thomas, the doubter among the apostles, had to finally say, in empirically testing the reality of the resurrection body, "My Lord and My God." Not a gnostic spiritualized resurrection abstracted into a principle of metaphysics, but the kind that left an empty tomb guarded by an alerted Roman Guard who would undergo death by Roman Law, if they failed.

The kind of resurrection that would change a small weakly band of men who denied their master once on the cross, and now fearful of the drastic forces of the Sanhedrin and their nation, not to speak of the power of Rome, into changed men who were instrumental in turning the world upside down for a man who was what . . . dead? Men so sure of this fact that each apostle, barring John, died a martyr's death. And the apostles were not the only witnesses of Christ's resurrection appearance, the Bible spoke of an assembly of five hundred who saw it and, yet, lived to tell about it even during the apostolic ministry of Saint Paul. And even the idiots of the day knew that the easiest way for the Jewish opposition power to dispel the spreading rumour of the resurrection was to produce the body. That was the problem, for some reason they couldn't.

Now came the proclamation of utter exclusiveness that truly made Christianity the "straight and narrow way." Part of the riddle, Acts four-twelve as Reverend Carroll opened his Bible reading, "There is salvation in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given among men by which we must be saved, save that of Jesus Christ." That narrow gate was to accept Jesus Christ exclusively as Lord and Saviour. Not bow down to any other Buddha, Krishna, Chaitanya, or yes, Sathya Sai Baba. Christ never said he would keep on coming. He came once and for all for that one specific purpose and his predicted one, and only return will be for the specific purpose of consummating all of human history as we know it.

I went deep into my mind to find the key in philology to deal with the "no other name," category. The synchretic key that I had found in the past was through the efforts of Paul Tillich in his books, *Dynamics af Faith* and *Biblical Religion and the Search for Ultimate Reality*, which were the first things exposed to me under the name of Christianity, following my huge LSD trip, in a theology course in 1966. Therein lay the groundwork for me to build a synchretic matrix with the other world religions. But all I found was a haze, void of the raw facts that I sought; no linguistic key of ethnic word origins which might connote "Universal Logos," instead of that one particular name.

The Tao in me froze in a cross-current of static from an opposing force, jamming my dials seemingly with more power than a million kilowatt Russian jamming station. Going to the question of Baba, I had yet to deal with the incongruity of such good and wholesome people as the Carrolls, who surprisingly, would show such an unpremeditated visceral repulsion of Baba, that the very idea of linking him to Christ was an anathema.

I had for a while discoursed Baba's great love and the raw goodness of people surrounding him such as Raja Reddy and Kasturi, models of excellence and patience. For surely, I gambled such credentials as goodness would break through to these people, the missionaries. But this brought on a whole new line of thought.

"A man can appear good, and still be deceived. Our own seeming goodness is not sufficient to bring us into the full light of God. Scripture, in fact, tells us repeatedly, 'None is righteous, no, not one.' For there is no better salesman for counterfeit truth than a good man." This thought hadn't entered my universe.

Surya Das sought to quell the tide of bigoted fanaticism, lest the Bible be misunderstood in a context less than the most spiritual. "These are universal axioms that speak to all men on their own level of consciousness. But to derive the highest meaning, you have to go above duality and all pairs of opposites, and realize that this is a roadmap guiding towards highest unity. But such understanding only comes with considerable spiritual evolution." Then as a second thought he observed, "I just can't see someone running around with little horns and tails."

"I don't believe the Bible asks you to do that, believe that Satan has little horns. I would not be a bit surprised, in fact, if that wasn't his own idea in the first place, to camouflage his true picture by an act of demythologizing. To the contrary, I am not at all convinced that this popular imp in any way resembles what Saint Paul was talking about when he says in Ephesians, chapter six, 'Ye wrestle not against flesh and blood but against principalities, against powers, against the rulers of darkness of this world, against spiritual wickedness in High places.' "

In the same vein, the Carrolls opposed Surya Das' idea that the Bible was most of all directed to a tiny fraction of high spiritual initiates. Rather, the plain statements of scripture stated the opposite. Far from just communicating to Oxford PhD's, or at the time, Pharisaic scholars, Christ was reaching out to those poor, unsightly, and abandoned orphans of the earth whose only credentials were a humble sincere hunger for God's love and forgiveness. Turning to chapter one of First Corinthians, the Reverend emphasized this, " 'You don't see among you many of the wise (according to this world's standards) nor many of the ruling class, nor many from the noblest families. But God has chosen what the world calls foolish to shame the wise.' "

Well, the disciples of Baba often prided ourselves on this identical clownish aspect, where our true exaltation appeared ridiculous to the world. Yes, there was a parallel.

As for an esoteric standard for interpreting the Bible, "why is it also," the Reverend pursued, "that Paul states emphatically"—and here he went to a more modern translation of the Bible—" 'Our letters to you have no double meaning, they mean just what you understand them to mean when you read them.' " That kind of provision allows your farmers and simple ordinary folk like us through the door if you see what I mean," Ivan emphasized.

The three of us sympathized with their plight, but we also knew that the Bible in its great multi-levelled complexity spoke a different form of angelic language, beyond even symbol, to those who were ready. And the true quantum leap had its leaping off point right where the Bible speaks of an absolute division in the universe between perfection and evil; a God of holiness who cannot look upon iniquity with his unadulterated eye without burning it to a cinder, forever apart from the fallen segment of his creation till some are reconciled and others consumed in the fire of judgement who have forfeited the only chance. After which the old creation, having passed away with its elements disappearing in fervent heat, comes a fully new perfect order of creation, even deeper in its goodness than the first (and only previous universe) and now immune, as it were, from further adulteration by the hypothetical entrance of sin, now no longer possible, no matter how subtle it be. The leap here, upon transcending the realm of Biblical literalness, came with the realization that this epic was a cyclical cosmic paradigm, a portrayal of the dual function of *maya*, beyond which was the oneness of all existence. It was the idea of this unity which was so difficult to drive home to the two missionaries. Especially since they knew the Bible almost verbatim, at least on the literal level, and we had to constantly stall for time to find verses to support what we knew intuitively to be true. Finding verses that we could barely recite whose location of fragments was more obscure to us than a needle in a haystack. Therefore, we sought to find the overview, and again look at the general allegory of genesis. We did know about that story. Paul on the other hand, we were quite frankly rusty on. But we knew that our dogged zeal and faith would make the difference, the Tao would show us.

Perhaps by the resonations of the right utterance, the barrier in communication might be broken. Surya Das, a Cherokee half-blood, now appearing more oriental than usual, his Mongolian features enhanced, awaited the right moment of silence and then uttered, "But it's all one," looking around calmly with an ethereal smile. His accent suggested the turbaned wonder boy, Mahendranath Gopal, riding an elephant through a curtain of Bengali foliage only to announce upon passing a tribe of monkeys, "Butt eet'zzz aul wan." The Carrolls, contrary to our hopes, were not bowled over with this proclamation.

Unfortunately, our problem was compounded by the fact that having been in India a little longer than we had, thirty years all told, they were somewhat familiar with "pagan notions of pantheism," and were thus not vulnerable to a surprise attack. I called them to admit that they may not have complete and total understanding of all the truths of scripture by which they agreed with predictable humility which would accept personal shortcomings with gracious forbearance. Here, the argument of individual capacity and "gifts" did make some dent.

With a partial foot in the door, and speaking with rare glibness and force, I spent the next half hour summing up the detailed highlights of mountain-top LSD experience, the 3,000 microgram "tree experience," as I used to call it. They stood their ground, and wouldn't budge as to its divine authority and nirvanic revelation. Being regarded as somewhat unsavoury was a little unsettling for me, especially since the Carrolls were reaching across to me through this narrow door with the only love they could faithfully show without betraying their faith. Far from casting me off, they invited me in. Yet with some fear and trembling, as though being cautious about the garments I was wearing. Had they just been aloof, I could have written them off. This was a little more difficult. I had to be as merciful and patient towards them as they were towards me.

As I pressed the account of my experience, the more of my own energy I tried to summon in validating with each second not only my beliefs but my own identity inextricably bound to them, the more evident it became that to me that these two old Elms felt absolutely no need to defend their stance in themselves. Rather, they seemed to obscure their own meek prowess under the cloak of mighty white robe, choosing instead to point to the inestimable power of another. And this "other" was another Logos, a different Christ, from the one that I had formulated.

Back and forth the controversy over truth went, neither side seeming to win and neither block conceding any ground. There were times we pushed hard into the hallowed territory of the Carrolls as they held their ground with sober fear. At such times, I would begin to feel like the Wolf in Little Red Riding Hood. And other times, with a gentle calm spirit yet speaking strongly, the Carrolls would counter us as always with just the right scripture on their lips as though written for the sole sake of countering us. In turn, at such times, my fire was quelled down to the marrow as shock went through my system as though slammed into a cinder-block wall.

By about 1.30 in the morning, it was finally time to call it a night and turn in. But only after the most burdened and heartfelt prayer by the [Reverend and Mrs Carroll that Christ would be the one to speak directly to our hearts and convict us all of the truth through the holy spirit. Little did they know the ramifications of their prayer, we the visitors nodded amongst ourselves.

The following morning, 1 March, the gentle forbearance by the two missionaries suggested that they were "loving the sinner but hating the sin." After loading us up with a delicious breakfast, they graciously agreed to drive us and our belongings to the Blake cabin in their jeep where Surya Das and I would go on ahead, and move in. Ed, now a little ill, would stay on a few days with Jerry who had suddenly become quite ill, and join him in the guest-room. Mrs Carroll, having also served for many years as a medical helper and mid-wife in the most primitive of south Indian villages, where they too had lived in the squalor of adobe village huts, applied her medical skills to Jerry, gasping when the thermometer registered 103.8°F. Off to the local physician, he would go for some sort of cloudy booster shot.Eddie that night, the Reverend's wife would record dutifully in her diary, would quiz her privately if God spoke directly to her. "Yes," would come the sincere and inevitable answer. Finally, being pinned down directly as to what God had told her concerning who Baba was, she would respond to Eddie with Second Corinthians, 11:13-15, "a false messenger of God." In a profound sense, we wondered whether these two people transplanted here in south India, were the greatest materialization of *maya* given by Baba to onslaught our faith.

Even after the other two moved to the Blake cabin within two days, throughout the week the four of us would pay the Carrolls friendly visits, forever extending Baba's grace into their home. Challenges met them continually to go and see Baba themselves at darshan; always in exchange for a warm meal.

But soon, they would retreat from the picture for all occasional visits, as Baba's domain would close in on us with more and more intensity. The yonder Blake cabin along the countryside between Whitefield and Baba's Brindavan Academy was another world, and our main truck would be between that and Brindavan on bicycles, and occasionally on the local bus to the town.

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For a while I received extraordinary attention from Baba, but something inside me was slowly crumbling. Occasionally there were distractions.

After the evening session, Wendel came home with me to the Blake cabin. In the main room, he moved in next to me, I assumed to stay. But Baba had other plans, and reticently, Wendel allowed it to leak out that he was involved in a staggering project out in Ananthapur. In the main entrance hall of the multimillion rupee college, Wendel was to do two giant murals, perhaps in fresco, perhaps tempra, or perhaps in acrylic, he wasn't sure. But each mural would be about ten feet by twenty feet, facing each other along opposing stairways. Baba had shown him what needed to be done, showering him with grace constantly.

In the late night candle-light in the Blake cabin, hunched against the wall, Wendel sketched secretively, guarding the product as we talked catching up on events, the sand-box interview, Baba's nature, and Aurobindo's concept of creativity as a means of escaping maya. In the early hours of the morning, Wendel was still dissatisfied with his various attempts, still straining for something original and showing me some of the results. I was impressed.

The morning of 11 March, a Thursday, Wendel would leave, and I would wake up at the desolate Blake cabin after having had one of a series of terrible nightmares, now in my deepest throes of doubt and depression. I had shared none of it with Wendel. I would choose to go into town alone, missing darshan, in order to think, to find some clue to patch my cracking monument of belief. Whatever secret momentum was at work within my mind, I could not locate its source.

Maybe a part of the oppression had been the Blake cabin itself. A damp dark little mortar hut without a strip of furniture, and nothing but a crusty cement floor to sit on, its bare walls were fully like a jail. The latrine adjacent to Ed and Jerry's room smelled, and rats scampered throughout the place at night. Huge blue-nosed rats that Mrs Carroll had warned were carriers of bubonic plague and rabies.

Then one night before Wendel's arrival, we finally resorted to a three a.m. exorcism session, using every mantra we knew. As we encircled a flickering candle, the four of us joined hands and screamed, "Om, raksha, raksha, Hum, Hum, Hum, Phhhattt, Swahaaaa," again and again to drive out whatever demonic presence had filled the place, our yells echoing out into the lonely black wilderness. The rats had been noisy that night, knocking over cutlery and tins in the kitchen area while scampering between that and the latrine. But that wasn't unusual enough to bring on the exorcism.

What had done it was a rather grim battle I had undergone reminiscent of Gill's discorporated battle with the Chinese familiar in this very same cabin; indeed, the same familiar that had followed Gill to Ananthapur to battle it under the stars that January, over a year ago, when I had first met Baba and Gill. Such spiritual attack was not utterly foreign to me.

As I lay stretched out along my mat, at 2 a.m., I experienced the same semi-paralysis and borderline dream state that inevitably accompanied those rare times when I had apparently astral projected in the years past. Just the effort to get a single digit on the little finger to move the required huge will. Then the rest of the body could gradually move, and that third pathway, in the corridor between wakefulness and dream state, would be broken, the spell rippling away into full wakefulness. But, as usual, I would go in and out of this state any number of times. When I let go and tried to drift into sleep, it would start up again; first the utter paralysis as though held down by ten G-forces, then my mind would begin to hurtle as a loud siren would start up in my head.

It was in this prone state when I felt a certain baleful presence in the room. Pinned down and unable to move. As I drifted deeper into the "buzz region," as I used to call it, a large rat tore through the room, scampering right up the length of my body. When it hit my head, seemingly carrying an explosive static force, I saw a configuration of blue energy crackle around me, first in an electrical pattern, then materializing into the hideous shape of some demonic aerial creature. I broke out of the paralysis, and tried to chase it through the wall, slamming into a thick block of mortar and pelting back on the floor mat. The others awoke. Angry and slightly shaken with fear, I instigated the idea of an immediate exorcism, which they concurred, having all awoken in the midst of nigthmares.

But my inner struggle a week later, that Thursday morning of 11 March though much less spectacular, was more far-reaching in its ultimate philosophic pervasiveness. A root problem remained as to how I might dispose of the reality of supernatural evil: either as an illusory stratum within the godhead, merely a cloudy phantom within the region of polarities cartoonesque, almost, in its inconsequentiality when in the face of ultimacy, or . . . as a shuddering in my gut sometimes told me (and it was this unpleasant primitive response which I was really seeking to unburden myself of), a non-unifiable wing of absolute reality at utter enmity with God, whose infinitely greater holiness, power, and just resolve, was such, that this evil had no other final destination than what Saint John's Revelation termed, "The Lake of Fire." In terms of the total span of eternity, it was a relatively short-lived phenomena, and the emphasis was to neither identify with it nor have any dealings with it if one wanted to know God. This was why the Bible warned the sons of Israel not to play the Harlot with the idols and sorceries of Babylon.

With an ice-cream cone in one hand from Nilgiri Dairy, perhaps to relieve the angst, I ran into one thing that far from resolved the problem. In a long row of imported paperbacks at Higginbothams Bookstore on Mahatma Gandhi Road, I felt a speedy urge to play a chance numbers game with the long row of paperbacks, and pull out just that one which would seek to answer my grief. I plunged one out, barely noticing the cover, flipped it open halfway, and facing me on the open page was a Jean Dixon account of her 1962 vision of "The Coming Anti-Christ." It was not the particular vision that stunned me, now suspicious enough to concede that even her vision–given the subtle powers of deception of a hypothetical Satan—might be a counterfeit. What was unnerving, however, were the standard Biblical references of prophetic eschatology. Here was a concept, one of a false Messiah purposively out to deceive the world, that had been far from my mind. One that I was not sure I had ever in my life really considered.

The portion of her vision which did not contradict scripture, showed an anti-Christ with numerous counterfeit attributes of the real Christ, supernaturally energized. It had succeeded in seducing almost all the inhabitants of the world, and then it started to walk on what appeared to be a straight and narrow path. The world followed. Well, along the way, it paused, looked back to assess its flock, then ever so slightly veered just noticeably to the left.

Soon after, another chip was kicked out of place in my monument of belief and the authority upon which it rested. Habit told me that the purest of intuition was that infallible balance with which to sift the truth. But a consequent fear emerged. When could I confidently know one hundred percent that I had absolutely tapped my very deepest and purest, and most infallible spiritual intuition? What alarm-bell in my head or heart would warn of the infallible moment? Doubtless, a strong private conviction should accompany the appearance of truth, an emotional response if you will, but the standard must also be a changeless writ, somehow outside myself as well as within apart from my own internal reactions.

At a modern paperback store further down the main street, I repeated the random selection routine, this time drawing a book that curiously amended the other book. Its basis was what it claimed to be that self-same infallible external standard of truth that I had just been puzzling about. The rock, in this case, was a fundamental, historic, and evangelical standing with regard to the Holy Bible; what it claimed to be God's written word to mankind by direct revelation to men of God's choosing, faithful servants of integrity who would rather die a martyr's death and undergo persecution than alter or take back one written letter of that revelation. The book was entitled, *Twentieth Century Prophecy*, by some Biblical scholar named Bjornstad. What was interesting here is that the book sought to weigh two specific individuals with regard to their self claims, Jean Dixon and Edgar Cayce.

I scrambled through the pages of the book amazed that within ten minutes I should find another book that would at least endorse my caution regarding the first book. Yet, it retracted not a jot of the prophetic content of the Bible. Soon enough I began to dislike its tone, too narrow in its acceptance of belief and divisive with its sword of truth rather than unitive and universal. Edgar Cayce, by strict Biblical standards, failed the test as a legitimate prophet. Then I discovered what the Bible's standards were, as the author quoted from Deuteronomy 18:21 with the question brought to Moses, "How then may we know the word which the Lord has *not* spoken?" The answer from the great prophet followed in the next verse, "When a prophet speaks in the name of the Lord, if the word does *not* come to pass or come true, that is a word which the Lord has *not* spoken." Such false prophets, who spoke less than perfect prophecy, by Mosaic law in Deuteronomy 13:1-11, were subject to death.

Once back in the Blake cabin, I received a third shock as I was glancing through a stack of photographs that I had just picked up in Bangalore.

Going painstakingly slow the fourth time through, I halted on a little two by three inch picture taken of me by Eddie one of those times that we had all gone out to the well, a half-a-mile from the ashram near one of the rice paddies and a small cluster of woods. Ed had snapped it as I was walking down the path towards the well, maybe twenty feet from the edge of the large rock-hewn pool. The outstanding memory I had regarding that one photograph in particular was that when it was taken, I recalled the conscious effort within me of surrendering to an overriding spiritual umbrella surrounding me. There was no mistaking its identity, it was Baba, and as a budding adept I knew what I was to do, surrender so that it would eclipse my own identity. Upon a hasty glance, my expression in the photograph looked fairly typical.

But as I brought it up closer into the light, using a magnifying glass, what had seemed shadowy and extraneous in substance before now took on a diabolical reality, similar to an enlarged microphotograph of the harmless_looking mole that turns out to be a raging carcinoma ready to explode cells out into the blood.

A deep feeling of uneasiness swept through my soul. I knew that I was caught in an inner war of faith. And what I longed for now more than ever was some kind of spiritual drama to turn my mind's eye from the eye of the hurricane.

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Exactly twenty-four hours later, at 3.30 p.m. on Friday, 12 March, "central casting" sent in the sort of "intermission" to my nightmare of cracking belief that if I were to organize a team of Hollywood screen writers to bail me out with the most effective, unforeseeable, and zany means yet it would not quite do justice to what actually happened. A car engine purred down the drive as Eddie ran in with the announcement, "Tal, you're not going to believe this."

Hurrying barefooted and in a stained T-shirt to meet the envoy, I ran head-on into Baba Ram Dass in one of those once-in-a-lifetime super cosmic *deja vus*. The complex inner battle of yesterday melted in my mind as I faced a handful of people who awed me, now appearing on the spot as the living author of a soaring best-seller in America, "Remember, Be Here Now," which lay open on the floor of our front room, and which I was turning to for consolation in those dark moments of doubt.

Eddie, who often kept Ram Dass in New York at his apartment when the famous "Upa-Guru" was passing through town on one of his lecture tour darshans, announced, "Ram Dass, meet the chief. This is Tal, he's probably closer to Baba than just about anyone except a few."

Behind the six foot one, bare crowned yet long-haired former Harvard Professor who had so upturned the consciousness of America over the past decade beginning with the psychedelic movement with Timothy Leary, his travelling band of admirers-seekers-fellow disciples emerged from the van forming a semi-circle around him. As the film of history was being made, some of them stretched in the country air, marvelling, while others smiled with a mellow knowingness.

Ram Dass's luminous eyes, now taking it all in, searched me. The surrounding onlookers were quiet. His hands rested on my shoulders as he remarked quietly while sparkling in his eyes with half-recognition, "I know I've seen you somewhere before."

"Yes, you have," came the deliberate response.

After a pause, the embrace of the long parted now in reunion took place. It could have been the Kiev railroad station at the end of the Russian Revolution. The only other master of the embrace I knew of from the West was Gill, the difference being, however, that with the latter, there was a narrow line where fierce zeal took on the attributes of a death struggle, where the affections of the wild-eyed hairy man appeared to squeeze the recipient into the after-life plane prematurely. Ram Dass certainly was not nearly as severe, but you could tell that he also valued the embrace as a means of deeper communication. At the perfect moment, the hug ended as the merry chuckles of the various extras on the set signalled that gold had been struck after all. Yippee. Into the Blake cabin the excited crew went, Ram Dass and I still pin-pointing who had been where and when.

"Remember the Millbrook Castalia Foundation years when you and Tim, and Ralph Metzner came through DC and then to Charlottesville?"

"Yes."

"Well, that was one time. Do you remember JD Kuch, Boo-Hoo of the Neo American Church off McArthur Boulevard . . . yeah, that's right, she and her husband were also in Mensa. OK, that's it."

"Wow. It's all coming back. I remember. As I said, you look very familiar, and it must go back very far."

"It does," I responded again, thinking of Baba's proclamation eight months back that my "brother is coming. Spiritual brother, not physical brother, of many lifetimes."

Now was the time for Ram Dass to turn to old acquaintances amongst the elect rockets, Eddie and Surya Das, while the group crowded into Jerry and Eddie's room. Ram Dass caught a certain smile radiating from Surya Das' features commenting, "It looks like you're really finding yourself."

"I am," Surya Das smiled, "and when you meet the avatar, you'll appreciate why."

Twenty minutes passed by while I pondered alone in the front hall, at times picking up bits of their conversation, which only reluctantly veered away from "here and now," perhaps for obvious reasons. They spoke of Hilda, Maharajji in Nainital, their recent stay in Bodhgaya near Benares under a Buddhist master, and the big tour with Muktananda in which this current stopover was near the tail end of after having combed much of the globe. It started in New York where Ram Dass met Muktananda through a disciple named Rudi and Hilda Charlton (who had studied under Nityananda, the guru of Muktananda). Overnight it blossomed into growing darshans of the two, Ram Dass and Muktananda, now with large spreads in the "Village Voice." And off the caravan went ending up in San Francisco and L.A. now with running into the thousands in large well known colliseums and halls, before it left for Australia. The tour would most probably end in New Delhi.

When I joined the group, finally entering the door, Ram Dass asked me about Baba. Specifics were what his well-trained academic mind was searching for out of the reams of data with so little time. I brought out the photos of the recent Mahasivaratri festival, narrated, editorialized, and everybody was happy. Off we went towards Brindavan in time for the visitors to sit along the darshan line before Baba emerged. The Volkswagon bus which we all packed into resembled a mini Benares with every conceivable variety of amulet, incense, tanka, Hindu deity in the rear cabin on dashboard.

As soon as the bright bus rushed through the gate, the western contingent sitting along the drive rippled with wonder. When Ram Dass and I emerged and went down the men's side of the drive with a small band of disciples and robed monks of various descriptions, the festival atmosphere started gaining rapidly. The girls on the other side, predictably, covered their mouths, jumped around, changed places, squawked, waved at us, faces cherry red, and so on, The last time many of them had seen him was at some large east village auditorium with the kids hanging from the rafters. The one whom Hilda referred to as the "doorway of enlightenment for America," incarnated for the age (and this Hilda only shared with a few) having once been one of the Seven Sages on the order of Vishwamitra; a full master in the last phase of amnesia, and then Pow. Would it be Baba's loving touch that would finally wake him up, we quietly wondered? For Ram Dass, in all his experiences, had not yet met the only one in two thousand years to walk the earth as a full avatar. And this historical boon of a single touch, the shakti path of enlightening energy, we awaited hungrily as the first ones to see this John the Baptist for the west soar into Samadhi never to come down again as Baba edged him, with a mild touch on the forehead or a gleam in the eye, into a region of being that isn't phased by a billion watts running down the spine, that smiles back when an auditorium full of seekers and dabblers and three-penny-psychics would be burnt to a crisp in a trice. And this would bring on an earthquake throughout the American media as this famous seeker, eyes as big as silver dollars, stared over the tube announcing Baba's advent, cleverly obscured from the west till that crucial point in time.

Ram Dass and his troop formed a line along the drive, most of them in the half-lotus, suddenly quiet, to find the flow of things. The rest restrained their frenzy by aping the meditative quiet of the envoy, in Ram Dass's jargon, "getting centered." Except for a few wandering eyes from the girl's side, drifting from the meditative fixed place, then darting back before detected, things almost looked as usual.

I quietly mounted the tiered steps to head towards Baba's residence by an obscure garden path. It went as unnoticed as the British Air Corps marching through Sumatra, as I detected that even Ram Dass' luminous eyes had floated off center for a moment. Perhaps with a good reason too as this was a liberty that he was not in the habit of taking with his own Himalayan guru, Maharajji, who by no means gave him any sort of preferential treatment above the local Nainital devotees. In my own internal canon of priorities, I was mounting another bold precipice using the present unusual situation as an excuse to do something that I had to fight and egg myself on with every inch of the way. Perhaps I was running a private contest with Wendel while checking the boundaries of my freedom around Baba.

For a moment I hesitated at Baba's door, slightly ajar, then plunged through the icy waters of doubt by pushing it open. Raja Reddy stood alone quietly at attention in the hall. With an unfaltering cordiality he welcomed me, ushering me in with a polite handshake. I told him about the drama taking place. He listened attentively mirroring back my own sense of importance of the moment, somewhat in the manner a kindly uncle will believe his small nephew's story about the ghost down the hall. He and I, in our earlier talks about what was taking place in America, had discussed Ram Dass' influence.

The sound of Baba's footsteps suddenly filled me with so weighty a reluctance to see him as Raja went to intercept him that I all but slipped back out of the door. I had that edgy delinquent feeling that I might have trespassed beyond my present measure of faith into hallowed ground. And now it was too late. Baba rounded the bend from the back darshan-hall and met me with a little more than an indifferent look hued by slight irritation which, more than likely, was an act of controlled grace. By all appearances, the effect of my visitation was what happens when a reporter drops in on a famous film comedian who is scintillating at prearranged press conferences but is morose at unannounced doorbell interviews.

The unlit reception room was stone quiet as Baba sat on the arm of a nearby chair while Raja gave him his after dinner silver betel leaf box. Musingly Baba rolled one up after painting it with lime paste, then slowly chewed it. The irritation in his voice continued mounting as he discussed something with Raja in Telugu.

Baba rolled the betel leaf around in his mouth chewing loudly and grimacing in the manner of a tobacco-chewer ready to spit. Grudgingly, he looked up to me and slurred the question, "What is this Ram Dass, Haaa?"

I pleaded the defense, speaking boldly now and bartering over the cruciality of the moment, reminding Baba of his prediction of my coming brother, and Ram Dass' dynamic mission in firing up spiritual interest in America. Baba responded with a number of asides of which I knew it would be my test of fidelity not to pass on to Ram Dass or the others.

Scathingly Baba revealed. "Who is Ram Dass? very impure. Now collecting devotees and himself does not know the way, seeking fame before is ready. Ram Dass is not as pure as my American devotees, that's right, he should learn from you. Not as pure as you. Seeking fame is play acting, guru play acting, ego.” After an ironic laugh, Baba dsked. “Ram Dass is married?”

“No, Baba, strict Brahmacharya. He is almost forty and is still single.”

I assumed this would be an endorsement. Babd made some sort of cryptic pun about Ram Dass’ past exploitations. And I would respond saying that in America it is very difficult growing up where most of us come from confused backgrounds. I reminded Baba of his proclamation about me that my mine shaft of experience was the deepest of the American bhaktas, yet, because of that the consequent mountain of displaced terrain was also the highest, as Baba pointed out to the others when we were all sign painting. Baba conceded this. I appealed to Baba’s great compassion that would even consider Ram Dass, as misdirected as he might have been.

“I am coming to darshan, don’t worry.”

In minutes I was again sitting right next to Ram Dass in darshan line, as though nothing had happened. Baba would soon emerge and quietly drift, tangentially, away from us towards the school offices. He would drift back, oblivious of the new envoy, till he was right over us, then all of a sudden announce beamingly to Ram Dass, “Ram Dass.” And that, for now, would be the extent of their communication. On the way up the drive, he would inform me that afternoon bhajans would be as usual and that he would be coming. The others would be invited.

After their first brief brush, Ram Dass would be searching for words to describe his immediate impressions, while umpteen ears bent forward, “He’s so light . . . he’s almost not even here.” Wait till you get into a confrontary crossbeam, I said to myself, somewhat bothered by what seemed a demeaning description of Baba.

Within the hour, and it would come, in the physics hall as all of us surrounding Baba’s seat and singing bhajans, would suddenly be treated to a surprise interview. Baba’s chair suddenly turned away from the girl’s half and faced directly head-on towards Ram Dass and me who were sitting side by side. All the details that were to follow, I would faithfully go home and write up, blessedly relieved that I had at last found the subject matter of one of my last few chapters in my little book to be published in Calcutta. Little did I realize what the content of the succeeding chapter would be.

The 20,000 words that I would type up over the next three- and-a-half weeks, till 10 April, in the dark and cramped little Blake hut, I would make sure were as true to fact as my recent and clear memory would allow.

Yet the meaning behind the events, between the lines as it were, would be another story altogether. This maze would be crossed by the light of my subjective impressions, that very germane means of roping together under a unity what otherwise might seem a kaleidescope of incongruous and even contradictory blips of experience. My own consciousness expansion in this whole experiential Koan would be crucial.

After Ram Dass and Muktananda left, weeks went by as I laboriously wrote up all the events to be a part of the book about Baba to be released in Calcutta. But then, midway through April, Baba departed for Bombay and I used the opportunity to go off alone to the coastal region of Malabar, near where Gill had once stayed. I would discover there how frayed my nerves were and how little peace I had.

The coastal town of Udipi, as the twilight revealed, was situated a frustrating two miles away from the actual ocean. As this realization hit me outside the bus amidst blowing newspapers and packs of dogs and mounting cries of *Sab*, I could feel my teeth beginning to gnash incredible railings and sub-audible blasphemies. Blown to smithereens was my dream of emerging out on a beach every morning or looking at some vast rippling expanse of water from a hotel balcony. "Sab?" someone would call me and I would address him, "This junk heap is just like any other junk heap. I may as well be in bloody-Mysore-bloody-city," and out would come a string of abuse.

Soon with a human caravan of followers, I led the way, raw nerved and "mad as a frambert," to what looked like a five-story, modern hotel, that just missed overlooking the beach by a few miles. But never mind. By now I was anticipating the hotel being closed or full, and having to sleep at the base of a tree with this rabble twittering and looking on. Imperiously, like the King of Bhutan, I entered the lobby, eyes blazing (a national tactic amongst the upper and middle classes of India to act with so much self-importance that the commoners would rather change the laws of the universe than oppose you). As the clerk stood up and brushed his hair, his silly smile started to quickly vanish, as I announced upon approaching that if there were any bribes expected, or if he fabricated a full house to gain an even higher bribe in kicking out an imaginary occupant, or if he jacked up the prices especially for us, my pupils started to open as my tone dropped from a near shout to a chilly proclamation, why I would, and my stare became unearthly as the clerk looked up in bewildered fear. Jerry politely intervened, diplomatically moving between the clerk and this intense inarticulate madman who just stood there and twitched as he tried to begin again. With great fear and caution, the clerk quietly escorted us up the stairs to two fine cubicles with ceiling fans, showers, dressers, and neat little cots for a measly four rupees a night. I was appeased, and tipped him generously as he graciously left us. The secret for getting things done in this plane of existence, I shared with Jerry in abstraction, was by sheer force of consciousness and spiritual will. But what I had done, I then realized, was to bludgeon my way through with a spiritual meat axe. Perhaps rest was what I needed.

By noon it was too hot to sleep any more, so we dodged from one stare awning to another, avoiding the deadening sun, meeting had the interim a young cheery-faced fellow from California who had finally made medical school, "way the hell out here."

"What do they use for scalpels," I asked, "broken shards of pottery?" With even less tact I announced, "With luck, you might even get to practice in West Virginia." His features somewhat sank as I asked whether they read medical texts in long scrolls of plantain leaf. I pictured something that looked like the Mahabharata, full of impossible lettering.

Then, after a brief comment on what we were up to, sensing what might be a vulnerability in him—that right cosmic moment, if you will—I asked bluntly, "Do you think you're ready to take a leap beyond all this garbage," now looking around in mystical understanding. My tone intimated, with respect to the brute facts of reality, "are you brave enough to trade in a nice respectable white frock for the torn robes of a renunciant or are you going to keep hot-doggin' it?" This might come with some shock to a fellow whose mom and friends back home revel in his bold leap into the unknown, this incredible little self-conceived pilgrimage to India where he could proudly stand in sandals on the Malabar coast terribly impressed with the fact that he was living out a part fully, as daring as some little skit in the life of Gauguin. But to encounter two compatriots far more given over than he to India's austere abandon must have nipped his vision in the bud—that so typical American tactic among masses of conformist nonentities who feel the need to pay the price for a unique identity that finding the right curious existential voyage entails (thereby undermining their wavering self-image more by identifying their essential character with some contrived or fortuitous event, drama, etc.).

Jerry left as planned, and I spent the rest of the week pondering my condition, still not at peace.

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On Saturday night, 24 April, after I stumbled through the dark rear approach path to the Blake cabin from the Carrolls' house, balancing my typewriter on the handlebars, I crashed through the front porch walking right into a pile of milk pails and bottles in the cabin entrance. I heard a sort of howl and so charged into the front room and hit the light switch. Spinning on my toes and crouched for an attack, I then stood up, feeling even more ridiculous upon spotting the one human form, that nemesis of old, that was the least liklely to be there beside my mat as for as I was concerned. Now the full thrust of this disarming encounter hit me. Perhaps groping for composure, the Lion-man Gill Locks, started up intensely with a look of gruff flittering across his features, and then forced a smile.

He was sitting in a full yoga posture, his lion's mane of hair now straggled and knotted, typical of a sadhu, his body thin and sinuous in contrast to his large head. Gill wore a Loin cloth. A new light was on his features. What now inhabited him seemed wholly other than the transitioning personality I had known before, as though I was meeting this person for the first time. At least this was my immediate impression before anything happened, as unpremeditated as meeting a stranger for the first time.

A peaceful assertiveness carried in his voice as he acknowledged me. Feeling raw-nerved from both the trip and having just come from the kind and supportive home of the Carrolls, I could already feel my stomach tighten as though to combat a great foe. Quickly pooling my reserve into an armour of composure, I asked this now classical embodiment of the master yogi (that romanticized image of the god-man illuminati to fill so many dust-covered books on mysticism in the nooks and crannies of musty bookshops) how he had been faring.

"Well, brother, well. And yourself? Let's see. Step into the light and let's have a good look," the rugged voice ever resembling Captain Ahab. Intoning as a proud father he went on, "Ohhh you've softened a little, you're gentler, not quite so hard and testy as before." Cautiously, I let a most ambiguous smile faintly trace across my features, my eyes still looking firm but not hard.

My nerve fibres very much exposed from the introspective tunnellings at Udipi, this presence before me was the last one I cared to deal with, and what I had to do now was not create any openings such as might arise should I let on my natural antipathy and distrust for him. For, truly at stake was the very real possibility that what was before me was not my most exalted image of "egoless love" rumoured to exist in that unknowable fraction of realized demigods but rather the unusual force of will of an unusually bent spirit. Truly then, I could not decide whether Gill had been sent by God or Satan or both. His influence was so great that I had already come to realize that the others would open up to him, and lap up his words of power, and perhaps cunning.

And how true did this inkling of mine come. For soon, Gill's closest ally would be Phil, absoultely staggered by the well-controlled exterior of gentleness and the consuming force that seemed to burn beneath it. For a second, I could not help but remember one of the last times I saw him in Puttaparthi after a mad most engaging and desperate hug in front of the local bus, back to Bangalore, Anthony looking on, while Gill sang with the abandon of a drunk, "Do whadjya dooo, beee what ya be."

The others, already back from their respective trips for several days now, pulled up on their bikes, the gears quietly clicking in the darkness of the fields. Gill was in the process of telling me how Baba, just the other day, for no apparent motive had him thrown out of Brindavan. Ed, Jerry, Phil, and Surya Das quietly concurred, now standing unobtrusively in the light of the front room. In Gill's account of what had happened, he described how he had sat quietly and reverently in the Brindavan darshan line, though not as clean as in earlier days his dhoti now soiled, his hair matted, the once long locks now balled up and hanging like frayed ropes. When Baba appeared, walked by and saw Gill before him, he returned at him pointing a watchful finger, commanding, in flustered shouts of irritation, " Go. You go. Get out and not coming back again." Finally, "Psst. Unclean, what is this?" Baba looked around, drumming up local crowd support, the ushers now nervously approaching. Immediately, the weather-beaten American yogi, perhaps fighting the rude shock with an inner fury, yet keeping even the tiniest self-doubt from escaping, lest it tear him apart upon surfacing, held down his private storms as hands seized him from all sides. The excited circle of ushers quickly wrestled him up and forcefully walked him out of the front gate, permitting him less dignity than a common criminal or a madman. Baba's orders were that Gill was never to come back again, essentialy declared now *personna non grata* and untouchable.

Gill, sitting under the bare bulb hanging overhead fluttering with night bugs, shook his head ponderously to Phil's question concerning whether he would ever try going back to see Baba again. No doubt, he admitted, that his love for Baba had remained unchanged. The others quickly assured that the difficult incident was sheerly a most unfathomable test in the final lap of *tapasya*, a straigtening by fire for a near perfect master, which none less in stature could withstand. Gill differed. Not "advanced," but having now already attained perfection. A few eyebrows were raised, mine above all.

The deep reverberating voice seemed to flow at us from all sides announcing, "I am as sinless as Christ." The others looked on stunned, I was not too taken aback. Then they began to accept it. I decided to remain a detached observer till things really got out of hand, then I might step in and perhaps even throw Gill out, I wasn't sure. I knew that if I announced my skepticism it would only cause divisions and would be interpreted as coming from a negative or competitive source. By keeping silent, I might also see how for Gill, had gone along in that direction. I even considered the notion that perhaps, after all, Baba could not coexist with another enlightened being in his territory. Maybe gurus had territories. But then, if it was "all one" the idea was ridiculous, though occasionally one wondered why all these gurus who had attained this cosmic unity found no visible unity amongst themselves and, by all appearances, seemed to bicker and denigrate one another (Sri Aurobindo had his famous bouts with the other neighbouring pillar of truth, Ramana Maharishi, and after that, the list was numberless as each one claimed sole authenticity).

The only thing I knew empirically was that Gill now claimed to have finally attained "that state" and I saw no prize or festive announcement coming from Baba. I saw the opposite, visible condemnation, from one whom I should accept as the final authority above Gill's testimony. The only way might bridge that grey region of accepting both testimonies was to conceive of the incident as having a private initiatory significance only to be known between them (through Gill's visible bafflement belied this). In this way the apparent rejection would be an intimate test of supreme love from one God-form to another.

"Why do you think Baba did it, Gill?" I probed.

"I don't know." He went on a bit, his tone shifting from an honest musing to one of hope and good faith. Perhaps that alone would make it all right. Though to me, when one is at the centre of utter knowing, as enlightenment presupposes, what need is there of faith, for it brings up the element of uncertainty, i.e., the higher you get the more unshakeable does one's self-confidence becomes till even the mightiest sledge-hammer blow from the guru will not break one's state. If one does break, how great the fall, as it becomes revealed that the aspirant was founded on a falsehood or delusion. Untested and unbreakable, there still remains the even more dreaded possibility that one has hardened, in utter and total confidence, without the normal turning back, into a state that is not "enlightenment," and will no longer receive negative feedback as it is considered a threat, and will continue until some final infinite barrier send him back to the elemental beginning of time. Here is where the feedback of the guru is essential as a preventive, that is, if the guru himself is right. Gill, I had to wonder about at this point. He was sure of his state, was anybody else?

The others reaffirmed Baba's secret love for him. Gill seemed to cheer up and go on to other matters now entering a teaching attitude. The others sat around him. I sat back on my mat and listened, now noticing that the only other on with apparent reservation was Surya Das, squinting on from some far corner of the room.

So it would be for an entire week. Gill would teach and share what he had learned in the wilderness and on the mountain-top, doing the listeners that rare boon of coming amongst us out of perfect silence to share his treasures for yet a brief while. Soon to move in and share this revival would be Howard, that one rocket of the seven whom I had never particularly liked, eternally self-righteous in his mortifications and self-denials, but always stupidly bereft in his understanding. For Howard, derived from the tribe of Levites, was the perfect Pharisee, always washing his outer vessels more than his comrades and using this to feel that extra special purity above his peers. But to me he seemed at the lowest level of all of us, a mere hen pecking at corn, still very much into ritual and karma yoga, and oblivious to the realms of understanding into which some of us who engaged in ceremonies less walked. Now, however, Howard sought human interaction after living off alone in the village of Velure for too long, and Gill's strength of voice he respected.

Now that I was beginning to open up a little, Gill was offering what might be very profound insights about his own path, the seeds of which had formed in his mind years back when he nomadically wandered from one California commune to another as "the teacher." In a word, "total sensitivity." For as he had told us of the old contingent during an earlier era, the voice becoming rustic, sometimes he could "even hear the trees growing" through the whispering night and the early morning in the California redwoods. His eyes shone with an Elfin light as he told us.

But total sensitivity had simultaneous origins—bits from Essalen therapy groups, and others from wild communal drug experiments when barriers were breaking down. So a new word evolved "up-front." The up-front person was back on the road to finding his soul and being able to relate as a person in a plastic, groundless morass, to start using cliches again, where scientific relativism was so infectious that humans had begun to forget that they were human such that they seemed to need coaching all over again to learn that children were to be loved—but more often than not they were not told anything—and there young souls bounced about on a conveyer-belt of divorces, now an institution in itself. The up-front person sought to love, he sought to "slow down" from the contraptions and contrivings of a modern-day world. Gill had even illustrated this once with an act about coming home from an insurance executive job in Manhattan; the poor cosmopolitanite unlatches an array of electric locks, bursts into his apartment, re-locks the door, and takes a long enxious sigh. Man had lost all grounding.

Up-front was tribal, anti-technological, concentrated on living the experience and not defining it, and it was against labelling. It evolved a group consensus of absolutes; funky, and spontaneous. The litmus test, though, was whether you could be "loving" all the time—receptive, unafraid, unparanoid, not having to apologize, or play games, or impress—all hang-ups they saw coming from a moderen world. Gone was the old world concept of human depravity and sin, they could get it together despite it all, all they needed was an even break. Therefore gone were the old foes of guilt, shame, prudishness, inhibition and the like. That is why commune outhouses in Marine county were often made of glass so that you could defecate with thumbs up, seeing in and out, getting into the flux of the total experience to let all hang out so far that it was no longer even there, as our friend might say.

Why hadn't Gill been up-front when he had been with Baba and the old contingent a year back, instead of electing the hermit renunciant role, and growling at almost anybody who spoke to him? He wanted to totally die to this world forever and if that required cutting people off, he would set his burners at full thrust and aim at the great beyond. His feeling then was that he had to go to the "mountain-top" alone to deal with the really heavy stuff, and friendly chatter was just an impediment, the hypocritical smile of the well-meaning enemy.

I had questioned Gill a number of times in those early days, didn't it bother him that in a sense the world was going to hell? Appalled, I would hear a deliberate and almost antagonistic "No. The only thing I care about is getting free. Freedom." His voice would rise almost to a skyward wail, "*Mokshaaaa*."

Now I sensed a new brokenness within Gill, a willingness to relate that reminded me of the monkey-on-a-string. In fact, at times it almost seemed as if he desperately needed our approval, especially mine, as though some invisible teacher stood behind him with a performance chart grading him at every moment he was with us. I knew that if this were true—that he was trying to make right, karmically, something between us—I would be his toughest obstacle, an adversary from way back as I imagined myself to be at times. Truly, for a time I had hated him. Of all the people that had ever been under Baba, the early Gill was the only one I had ever hated.

For days we asked the bearded pioneer where he had gone for the last nine months, aware that his present willingness to communicate was a brief interlude, as he had warned, between another perhaps longer silence.

Gill had been all over India and Pakistan. For so touchy a crab, as I always envisioned him, it was a wonder he hadn't gone berserk from the ravings and pandemonium of one train station after another, to the crowded streets, and every manner of hellish fruit stand and ramshackle tea stall where the natives (void of anything else to do but sit in hungry boredom when little sideline dramas were not in progress) just wait to swarm anything the least bit out of the ordinary. And Gills' appearance, well, it was a most rare and remarkable thing, impressively commanding and intense, ever verging on volcanic unpredictability. The crowds following him, I envisioned, must have been unbearable. Gill agreed, they were huge. But he assumed so for a different reason. The crowds followed him much as those rowdy and testy peasants in the Judean hills two millenia back must have, by their very contrasting worldliness and impurity, in a sense, offended the divine purity of Christ. Gill too, by being in the world suffered indignities.

"Why Pakistan?" I pursued.

"My brother is an aeronautical engineer living in Karachi."

This I could not imagine, it sounded so prosaic. "What sort of rapport have you all had?"

"Never very much, we are as unlike as any two people can be."

For his brother, I surmised, it must have been traumatic. Like baby Snooks waking up to find an alien being in the adjacent crib—you know, one of these weird things pulled out of the wreckage of a flying saucer, tentacles and psychic mind projections floating across the ceiling, bookcases passing through walls. And all hell breaks loose as a microwave brain tube enters baby snooks ear, eyeballs cooked to a frazzle . . . ." I jested with the others some days after the bearded mystic had left us, leaving the Blake crew doubled over in laughter. Somehow, I could never imagine Gill growing up in anything like a family of humans, but never mind.

"Uhh, what happened in Karachi?" I asked. The others listened intently.

"Well, when I arrived at my brothers' apartment," he continued solemnly, "there was a party going on."

"Betcha some egos died there," somebody ventured.

If Gill were capable of laughing in the conventional manner, I imagine he would have laughed. But the comment fell like a stone as he ignored it and went on. "I came in the door as I am dressed now and what had been rather light-hearted, superficial, and perhaps frivolous chatter died as though someone pressed a button and switched them off. They felt immediately threatened by my presence. Some gawked in amazement, some made disparaging remarks, and those few men who had any balls at all, even the balls to play aggressive roles, only reluctantly mustered the courage to make outright attacks. But as I looked them directly in the eyes they would look dismayed and falter. Then, the only way they could keep their little thing going was to gang up. But I still looked at them, searching. They didn't like that at all, that really frightened them because they had no ready response to that. This is what happens to people's little ego games when up-front person enters their presence. The rules quickly change. Everything they know begins to shake loose because it's just blind faith in what they have been told or accepted as a convention without ever questioning it. And soon the energy level becomes too much for them to cope with, and this is where they really begin to become exposed."

Resembling a great sphinx purring as he narrowed his eyes and gently rolled his head, as though to loosen his neck, and in the act to either absorb or fend off some botheration, Gill continued, "It is remarkable what some people will do to hold on to their egos. They look for some niche or weakness to try and control you with or they try to be very articulate and abstract, and analyze the situation, not realizing that this is like prostitution. It keeps them from ever directly involving themselves in what's happening by always holding it at arm's length. And in their fear of looking uptight, they try to seize the conversation, playing one meaningless word game after another." A trace of irony crept across Gill's features, "I just stare back with love, searching into them, and boy you should see how that trips 'em. They lose the thought in mid-sentence or what they pursue becomes even more ridiculous."

One bird-like woman came up as he was sitting down. "Oh, you're so savage. None of these others," she looked around confidentially, "would venture out into this wild and woolly place in bare feet and a loin cloth, hey?" Some of those others, that cool in-crowd of mockers, looked on from their tiny circle on the side, joking, whistling, and shaking their drinks.

A deep resonant voice perhaps caught some people off guard as it cut through all the extraneous jabber in sober gravity, "I love you . . . you . . . more than you can ever possibly know. You see I am you." Gill's eyes were stronger than the Rocky Mountains.

"Uhhh." She was caught for a moment. Then, oh smart little girl, she found a way out. She sat in Gill's lap as some of the guests continued looking on in the awkward silence, while she felt his beard to see if it was real. She even tugged it a little.

In response, she got about as much of an emotional rise from Gill, as much passion, to further extend the analogy, as the Rocky Mountains. For a while, he let her questions peter out. First, about his tough caloused feet, his bony ribs, his vegetarian diet, hig bare chesting the icy winds of northern Punjab, Kashmir, and Simla, his eternities of meditation, and the long, ropy, matted locks that hung down his back in frayed cords, bound by mud and cow dung, no different in outward mortification than a well seasoned Shaivite sadhu, or naga.

It seemed her little society of grown-up doll-houses just couldn't take it all in. You see, respectable folks, well, practical people, kept things in nice little safe-boxes. It just wasn't safe to stray from the popular mainstream of thought, the conventional mentality. For one thing, there was always the threat of losing social acceptance and being looked down upon as, well, different. And who could withstand ostracism? So everything out of the ordinary became a source of laughs, it was just more expedient to deal with it that way. If some fanatic came along with strong convictions, Christians above all, especially if the ideas were challenging or unsettling, then he might be humoured and fooled into thinking people were taking him seriously but . . . really now. You see, the beyond and all that sort of stuff, the scientists hadn't proven yet anyway, and they are men of pure objectivity who, if they don't already have the answers, are just around the corner, or around the bend from being able to explain everything away.

I mean the issues we should worry about ought to be simple down-to-earth affairs that make life meaningful. Let's be honest now, things like cars and a fine home, and education, a good job, and steady income, and knowing fun people who're always there for a good time. And boy, don't they grow in abundance as you climb that old social ladder of success, they thrive just like money. And that's another reason to go all out to strike it rich.

And the unknown and spooky stuff . . . ooohhh, yik . . . like that. Well everyone knows they've proven the origin of the universe (Fred Hoyles' "big bang theory"), and that man will get the better of it some day. Heck, we've already landed on the moon. Even grade school textbooks have pretty much thrown it all in, in explaining the origin of things, (teleology), and chalked it up as modern man's triumph of his own intelligence to have, for all intents and purposes, answered "the question." Mysterious and superstitious fears, meanwhile, just come from an animal vestigial remnant of the cortex carried over from some stone-age brain; it's all electrochemical. They all say so.

Her little party brain, meanwhile, ticked away to find new ways to get a response out of this oddball (you know, all guys are alike and after the same thing.). Possibly, she even poked her tongue in his ear. Not because she sincerely wanted to really get things going but to see if, just for laughs now, she might be able to break his silly obsession and get him to break down. And when they were tough like this, real challenges, making her doubt her own, well, facility as it were, then more desperately did she feel the need to use them as foils to try herself out on. Cause, that's the way you nab your man hold on to him by your own terms. Keep him needing you, right? And that's love.

Like Gill, I too was what they called a "heavy." It was just the reverse side of the coin of the lights, like Ram Dass and maybe Phil and Surya Das, who could just radiate a gentle love like milk laced with honey. Gill could take your head off with a stare if he wanted to. People told me that at times I had the same effect, but I had to let go to an other outside, or perhaps within, myself to do it. Siva, the destroyer, or Abbadon, as he is called by western tradition, shows love by first annihilating that which cannot stand the force. What remains has been transformed, presumably by love, as silver in a smelting pot. Baba, when he exposed his wrath, was supreme in doing this with his Indian followers of longstanding. I had seen them literally fall apart before his eyes and buckle at his feet, pleading, as though for another chance at life.

"How ya doin' brother?" Gill asked, grinning at Eddie.

"Fine," came Ed's tentative response as he mustered a smile.

Gill embraced him in a warm fatherly hug. Phil smiled with enlightened knowing, and soon followed suit. In little time there was a clump of hugging brethren all standing together in the hallway. When they all broke away, Surya Das' former obscure distance in the corner soon became the focus of attention. Controlling a slight flush, he stood up, manning his own dignity like a Cherokee about to balance a cliff's edge. Then he smiled, and almost swaggered over to Gill, faced him off at arm's length smiling into Gills' eyes, his own eyes slightly hesitating underneath, then he pulled Gill in for a tight hug. "Well done, brother, well done," came Gill's reply, patting Surya Das on the back as he came away slightly redder than before.

Ahh, now it was Tal's turn, still sitting on the floor and looking on the whole time. This time it was evident that Gill was fighting some sort of cold draft within him. Meanwhile I just coolly reached up with one arm and pulled his head down to my shoulder, still sitting, as he squeezed back. "Oh, come on," the voice challenged stoutly. I stood up. "Yeah, that's right," the onlookers encouraged. Not conciliating too much, my sober stare took on what might seem the faintest glimmer of a smile, perhaps a smile of irony, as we embraced again. I was still very much eyeing Gill's every move, not at all convinced that he was free from manipulating people, himself a past master of control. And why did I see this in him? Well, the usual response when you see something negative in others was, "You are projecting. That ugliness and negativity is what is in you. I'm only a mirror." True, I had all my life some kind of edge on people whereby I could usually read them and think ahead fast enough to somewhat dictate their reactions. This was one reason I could so easily pick it up in Gill.

But as the week went on, by degrees, I conceded ground. In part I believed that Gill's substance was genuine (perhaps it was his new openness, not as volatile), or, if it wasn't, in order to take a closer look I needed to get as close to the core of him as he would allow. For now I would bluff partly and rely on the testimonies of Phil and Jerry. Ed and I knew well enough to see that this toughened orphan was not at all convinced that "this was the one." Perhaps he too like me was letting go for the sole reason that such was the only way to have a real look.

Surya Das too seemed to glorify in what appeared a new renaissance of the spirit, not like Phil, Howard and Jerry, but more from the stance of a co-initiator, eager perhaps to show his familiarity with where-it's-at. Anyone, after all, who's been with Tim Leary at Millbrook on some of his heaviest trips can truck this route. Indeed, Surya Das may have even been present when Leary and Alpert (alias Ram Dass) had their marathon stone-in on STP in the bowling alley at Millbrook, not to speak of his similar closeness and access to Yogi Bhajan (whom he aided at the Colorado festival of light), Swami Satchidananda, Kirpal Singh, and Steve Gaskin, to name a few. He'd "been there" almost every time.

When the group was not just solidified in mellow smiles, people just being up-front with affection and finding total being in the eternal present—which was only impeded by thought habits of a wandering mind, concern over the future, and the general tendency to think through problems—Gill would offer additional details of his ventures. The rugged months alone in the thatched hut on the shores of Udipi taluk; spiritual attacks, astral battles, monkeys raiding the hut, villagers peering in, midnight fire ceremonies of the natives, and finally police raids. Repeatedly the police hammered away on his door while he was meditating, and barged in wanting all the legal certificates of an alien, letters of residence, etc., threatening that if he did not produce them, he would have to be deported from India. They continued to torment him regularly heedless of his wish that they just vanish like a bad dream. He'd haggle, roar and try to blow their minds every way. Perhaps their defense was that they did not have minds to blow—no matter what recourse he took, their mouths would drop in the standard posture, and communication would go no farther—they would stubbornly persist. In the end, he vowed that he would just let go, no matter what happened, and stop trying to deal with it by aggression or cunning.

But at Udipi taluk he did make break throughs as crucial things within him were faced. Perhaps some old element of iron self-will snapped in the end. After that he wandered. Back to Puttaparthi in October to get a letter from Baba (for two days at that time he and I were constantly together, going to the well, eating, and what not). Then Gill went to Juhu beach soon after, near Bombay. Then for a while he went to a cave ashram where one can sit for weeks on end, alone in the darkness as yogi-servants quietly bring food and water, pushing it through a crack.

The Blake crew wanted to know where this cave ashram was, just in case. Maybe one might emerge, who knows how high.

Well, they were careful who they let in and you had to write them in advance. It was the "Hari Om Ashram" at Kurukshetra in the State of Gujarat near Bombay. Gill told tales of the stormy seas of meditation in the cave, when hours stretched into eternities, and the only way he knew day from night was by the food-tray slipped through a rock crevice. And then he soon lost all bearing as to whether it was dinner or breakfast. And when after several weeks you came out into the full light of the day, my heavens, it was incredible. "It's so bright you just have to cup your eyes and stagger around." In the cave again something popped within Gill but he would not specify what it was, only that you needed to be ready. Interspersed with Gill's account of his sojourns, he taught, and many of these teachings I entered into my diary.

"Don't deal with problems, they are traps. Let them go by. Give others enjoyment in a hug by letting go and enjoying it yourself. Learn the language of the body so that you can look for warning signals. Let go of the nerves."

Then again, "While you are in silence, if there is a voice within, with a pause before and a pause after, it is probably the teacher." This had come as a trembling announcement. "Heed the voice of the teacher."

Looking with sober gravity, Gill continued, now directing his statements to me, having already singled me out that day as "the strong one," and one who was further along than he realized. "After the voice of the teacher, the tests will start coming soon after that. Watch out for them. And do not forget the love that you have seen. Stay up-front, expand the womb, keep on going through the cold region." His voice trembled slightly, "Don't cop out of the cold region. Keep the contract."

A prophecy then followed as the others leaned forward to share in this nighttime revelation, one to come on Gill's final night with us in our particular valley of existence. It concerned me.

His eyes opened with dark mountainous strength, "Fairly soon, your heart center will open completely, and you will come to know all the truths that you know but don't know." Previously he had spoken of the classic meditative phases of working through the chakras where smells emerge that have never existed, then the region of bells, and then the yogi begins to see around corners and at things that are happening from afar. Yet I wondered if this flattering prophecy was not a partial concession to reopen a door of trust that had closed in me the previous night after Gill and I had had a conflict concerning my writing of a book—the typewriter became the focal point of the issue, and if I had to choose my inner conviction combined with Baba's authority over Gill's discernment, Gill and I might part ways. It was tense. I got up and sat right next to him staring an inch from his eyes. It scared everybody but Gill and me (who were loaded with energy but not really afraid) as they sensed that a fight might start off up from my controlled fury and the sheet of power I faced off at. After he was satisfied that I was not playing a game by writing, he gave a light warning of the pitfalls of confusing that with really important matters, then breathing like a vintage gladiator who had become a pacifist (which had a parallel, for years ago when he was a sergeant in the Marines, he taught Judo. I had boxed somewhat and spent four years concentrating on Karate, on the other hand), now once again tempted to enter the ring, he let out a sigh of long suffering patience. I should write but not become attached. I agreed again. Also that night, later on, he told me, "Your greatest strength is your greatest weakness." I pretended I knew what he was referring to.

"Do you know what it is?" Before I could answer him, he responded, "Your intellect," sending a chill down my spine. This had happened the previous night.

Now, after the declaration about my heart center opening, Gill chose a warning note, perhaps to dampen that which might incorrectly attach the achievement to my pride (for truly, I was ever hungry for further experiential evidence of my advancing spirituality). "Remember, judge not lest ye be judged. When we judge others, we feel judged ourselves, continually, and so act in respect to their judgement."

On that final night that Gill was with us, an incident did crop up that once again brought into question the fundamental issue of whether Gill, after all, had truly been summoned by the-powers-that-be as a teacher. It also dampened the validity of the prophecy. Gill had been describing his recent stay in Ganeshpur, at the ashram of Muktananda—when Ram Dass (now ambivalent in his feelings about Baba) and Muktananda got there from their tour, Gill was there himself submitting to the regimen of the ashram, its duties, and its tight chain of authority from guru down to initiates and chelas of varying levels of attainment, as the lowliest of neophytes. But the hard edged certainty of an advanced walk such as Gill's did not waver under authoritarian pressure and the threat of rejection which might so fearfully overwhelm a neophyte (whose self-definition and walk were inextricably bound to the spiritual community). Nor did he fear chastisement by the guru or the threat of having to go back to the outside world. Because of this he met warnings and rigorous regimens that resembled fraternity hazings, with an implacable indifference which was then construed as a violation and defiance of sacred tradition. The result, ejection.

While swabbing the commodes, should he feel the urge, he would sit down in mid-stroke to meditate. A medium grade initiate would come up to chide him, there would be a psychic burn-out, and the kid would go off screaming for help, fleeing like a minnow from a manta ray. On up the chain it would go. Few but the guru felt they could handle this dude. Muktananda was totally ambiguous in his response to Gill, and nobody else could decide quite where he was spiritually.

And Ram Dass, the Blake crew asked, did they ever meet? Yes, and Gill was not particularly impressed. Was Ram Dass high enough, we wondered, to see where Gill was at? Well, they only talked once and Ram Dass seemed insistent on holding his own, not giving any concessions, apparently with plenty of other things on his mind—to face off Gill, he would fall into the strong mind too, but how about alone on a windy mountain face, Jack, can ya face this warrior off alone? someone might ask the articulate Harvard professor. It's easy when your pals are around.

In Gill's judgement Ram Dass had a long way to go. He was soft. In a way I could see it—like the Mayor's pudgey son who thinks he's clever enough to bluff his way into the local hoodlum gang, and thinks he has fooled them while they can see otherwise, and the final crunch reveals that he is a coward, as a tiny gang-war breaks him down, and he goes plodding off back to mama's doorstep. Yes, he talked a big talk. But would his own weakness pull him back when the impetus of world fame had died down?

Gill also implied that Ram Dass was being for all he was worth by the chain of spiritual command who was giving him more leverage than his level of maturity deserved. His flamboyant joy-ride and shoulder rubbing with the illuminati would eventually end, not quite in the adoration that he sought but in the humiliating brunt of a cosmic jest, geared to liberate him by no more royal a road than anybody alse. Ram was not made of that steel fiber required to scale the slopes of Himavat alone (found in that macho band of super male hard asses and weather-beaten rishis of antiquity), but was an opportunist; a loquacious, slightly theatrical, dilettante in the tradition of the moaners, grand mammas, and psychic mediums of the ouija board brigade who howl at the metaphoric nuances of a full moon, read tealeaves, ever reminiscing over their Atlantean lives and kitchen cupboard visions.

Yes, as I had wondered all along, Wendel did see Gill before I returned from the beach in transit back to Ananthapur, answering my old wish that the two encounter one another. The verdict to come weeks later after Gill left and Wendel returned again for a few days was a most vague "Ahhownnoo (I don't know)" before adding, "Aw, he didn't impress me at all." To Wendel's aura field reading discernment, Gill was not any illumined sage or vast soul on the edges of final perfection but a disgruntled' confused, perhaps foul-tempered, slightly paranoid gremlin consumed in messianic grandiosity—and this was a non-prejudicial first impression. All Wendel saw was Gill on the darshan line, before and during expulsion by Baba. 'Not much light, maybe a lot of braggadocio and hang-ups."

The incident that stumbled us that final night came as Gill got to the subject of the "Blue Pearl," Muktananda's highest achievement, something that he had later written a book on, and something that continually filled his Ganeshpur ashram with speculative whispers. It had followed an incredible thirty years of nomadic roaming after leaving home as a boy, after meditating perhaps ten years in a Bengali forest, when finally under Avadhut Nityananda the former personality of the aspirant died while Nityananda gave the being a new name, Muktananda. Well, Gill, sitting on a straw mat, was playing with a little tin box. It was the same box that contained some mysterious object that Baba had materialized for Gill in earlier days that he then guarded with a fervent jealousy, only allowing Baba to peer in and touch duing interviews. Anyone else in those days trying to sneak a look would get a fierce look as the old Gill would slip the box in his bag.

The present Gill now revealed it, commenting that he was breaking a seal of silence, but was not sure that it mattered any more. In the tin box, resting on cotton, was a sheet or scroll of metal with cryptic lettering—Baba had told him it was very ancient and would bring power in meditation. It just looked like a fairly new piece of copper, beaten out and slightly corroded, to me. Then, now that he was in the act of displaying things, Gill brought out that same stone that Baba once materialized, blew a hole into, and gave to him; the one with the miniature stalagmite and stalactite.

Gill's musing, matter of fact voice said, as Gill, now distracted from the conversation, peered in rapt absorbtion down the tiny black hole in the rock, "I see it."

"What?"

"The Blue Pearl."

A slight clearing of the throat and a less than convinced tone responded with slightly depressed, 'Really? Hmmmm. Where?"

"Down there." He looked up perhaps sensing a note of incredulity. As though to drive the point home—how could this man have less than the deepest of deep experiences even during the most prosaic moments? "I see the blue pearl at the end of the black hole . . . it is down there, through the tiny chasm that Baba created."

Heads craned around to have a look, "Can't see it." Again, "Nor can I. Hmmmm." Somehow I sensed that I was not the only one edgy to have the subject changed.

His assertion grew in forcefulness as he described it. "It is a bluish pinpoint of light of the most amazing colour, a tiny bead, maybe the size of a pinhead physically, but it can grow. I have now seen the blue pearl." At that point, someone did change the subject as he quietly tucked the little rock away in a little leather pouch, holding, as always, considerable dignity and command.

The following day, Friday 30 April, a jubilant, singing core of six disciples marched the bearded mystic to the Bangalore train terminus, arms around each other, just being up-front and worshipful of the scheme of destiny, the here and now, and the deity in one another. Gill would smile, reach over and grab my shoulder, "Hey brother, you take care now." The others would surround us by the hooting train beside a rowdy third clsas box car, people hanging out of the window like grapes and staring at this strange pack of foreigners. Gill would smile again at me, always isolating me from the pack, coming out with the perfect line every time, "Some day, brother, we will both be hitch-hiking down a super-highway in Nebraska, each on the other side of the divider without a penny in our pockets. We won't need to run across, we'll just have at each other and continue hitch-hiking."

He was talking about full enlightenment, we all knew, *nirvikalpa samadhi.* The crew smiled for both of us. As the train slowly began to edge forward, everyone bent down and touched Gills' feet, an act of extreme ceremonial reverence in India, after he had knelt down and touched his forehead on our feet. Not looking back before sitting in the open door, crouching like a beggar with a stick, Gill in the box car moved out of the station, his eyes staring right into ours. The crew slowly exhaled. "Wow, man," and that was it. Here dawned the new era of Blake cabin up-frontness, at least for a time.

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"Ya ever see a pteradactyl about to take off? You know what I mean, like one of those museum models all perched up on a plaster of paris cliff, fifteen foot wingspan and all. That's what she looked like, I'm serious." We all laughed. Surya Das stood in the doorway, his arms out like some bat creature, head hunched forward, and back bent. Then he slowly stalked forward. He was imitating the darshan of "The Mother" of the Aurobindo ashram at Pondicherry where he had recently gone before Gill's arrival. Once or twice a year the ninety-six year old "mother" appeared on a third storey roof-top balcony in her Franco-Indian mansion, the headquarters of Auroville International. She would look down silently on the crowd below, then, resembling the Pope, give her blessings with a signal or a wave. Silhouetted against the stark Madras sky, she indeed resembled that ancient reptilian bird, the pteradactyl.

During the busy Blake cabin happenings, Surya Das had not found time yet, since his return, to share his fascinating jaunt with the Carrolls. But now that Gill was gone, in a new found wave of enthusiasm, he told the two patient missionaries of the wealth of modern India. Consequently, in her diary, Winnona

Carroll would record that Surya Das' visit was "Oppressive as he raved on about Hindu Roman Catholic 'saints'," Auroville, the Mother Teresa, Neumann, and other stigmatists, and his recent faith in Saint Teresa. Indeed he along with a small group of other Baba devotees had already begun to visit the shrines of the 'saints' in two large Bangalore Cathedrals. Upon this tricky subject, the Carrolls would hold fast, stating only in the words of Martin Luther, that scripture alone was all sufficient as God's revelation to man in providing the guiding light. We did not need other human intercessors to get us to Christ, but the "God-breathed" word alone was trustworthy. The Carrolls were not too receptive to Surya Das' argument that the peaceful vibrations validated the shrines.

Surya Das would go on over the weeks to try and impress upon me his growing vision from Auroville, of an international yogic community based on Whole Earth Catalogue concepts of living; geodesic domes, organic gardening, mass creativity, and group experience. He would be an artisan, and under Baba he would bring something out that would eventually pale Auroville. On he would go about solar cooking, capillary action air-conditioning and various Fred Flintstone concepts of desert technology and home appliance for the renunciant yogi.

Around this time, in early May, a young couple arrived from New York bringing tidings from Hilda in the form of a full stereo tape on a Uher recorder. The couple, Steve and Leslie, were the much talked about focus of many of our New Yorkers. Their "neat" apartment had for a long time been the center of yogic happenings in Manhattan; Hilda often made use of the large decorous park or Fifth Avenue apartment for meetings, Ram Dass, and Muktananda stayed there, so did Suffi Sam, and any number of yogic illuminati. Steve's "worldly job," as a married householder, was to install sauna baths around Manhattan by means of his own private company. According to Michelle, Leslie cooked the best vegetarian food available. It was with a certain clenched tooth grin that Michelle remarked at one time, "Oyvay. They're not going to believe it over here." Then like a shrowish scratch battle she would go on, "Leslie's going to be crying to go home in a week, she's so pampered." A picture of a dainty demanding little flower would be presented. "The mosquitos, the heat, the dirt, dogs, roaches, scorpions, etc. Oh my God, the cobras, etc. The beggars." And on it would go, while the girls listening would cover their mouths giggling. But Steve's logistics had worked a way around the traumas of India, creating a cushion for Leslie and himself.

Indeed Leslie was soft as a rose and pretty, amongst that strain of Jewish red-heads. But she hadn't exactly come overland with a knapsack and combat boots. Like most of the others, the couple flew. But unlike the others, somehow they had arranged to meet a van either shipped or driven overland by some of the Ram Dass' group. While they remained in the Bangalore area, they had a handful of top-rate hotels for their choosing. With their arrival, everybody knew, would be generous founds for the various penniless bhaktas or those just on the verge of going flat broke. Eddie too would receive a contribution as one of the closest people to them. In all, I liked Steve and Leslie.

Atop the big boulders and flat rocks near the Blake cabin, everlooking the miles of open terrain, the Blake crew, Steve, Leslie, Michelle, and many of the old Hilda crowd would hear the tape for the first time. Some of the girls from the old contingent, taxed from a year in India, would cry. Meanwhile this incredibly sweet commanding voice would tell the seekers to keep their chins high, to walk nobly in the pathways of the gods, that etetnal bliss. "Assuredly, my dear little ones, and you young gods, and dear brethren from the beginning of time," was just around the corner. That we in India were doing the bravest and noblest task in the world, a walk that was sure to lead us to an end point whose grandeur was beyond our conception.

It was Cinderella's fairy godmother speaking, or the good witch of Oz, telling her cosmic pupils in the sweet language of a nursery rhyme to bear up, and not get discouraged by "Baba's little tests of love" and what not. Then came comments and messages to key individuals. "Meechell Angellll . . ." and Michelle would sniffle. Her voice would strengthen as she addressed a male leader, "And Tal, although we've never met in the flesh in this life . . . I know much of you. May your walk be great . . . ." Forever we would be reminded of Baba himself as the secret to the highest pathway, to shun distractions, to remain singleminded on Baba's contrality and never forget that, "He's Lord Krishna Come Again!"

Within a few days, on 4 May, we would have our first interview with Baba, of any length, for a long time. Possibly this was the night that Barbara was to have her baby. Laughing, poised and assured, Baba celebrated the moment, resembling a chunky midwife who has just aided the easiest delivery of all time.

At the instant of the birth itself, recorded by the clinic, Baba shut his eyes and rolled back his head gently. A gleeful babyish smile greeted us a moment later, as Baba mopped his brow, "All is well. Now baby is born, and Barbara very very happy." He named the sex as the entire group went giddy.

The giddiness pursued other matters, as love chose to deal with "ignorance" of all sorts through the compassionate vein of humour. Baba's asides, perhaps to come across in a mode of purity and goodness, resembled a nun telling a most mild joke, and flushing as she did it. Though with a slight change in expression, the mode would have become sardonic. In line with the tradition, Baba's comments used me as the usual sounding-board, even though I sat twenty feet to his side, apart from the crowd. Soon. I would move over to him, sliding across the flagstone floor, to ease his dialouge with me. Now Baba faced the group as I sat beneath his chair. Nodding like a four-year-old to some of his comments required a peculiar form of courage, I thought, than some of the typical machismo dares I used to engage in during my cycle days.

What followed in my diary record was a finely timed moment of rapport. Baba made a sunny declaration of pure child-like love. He twinkled down at me proudly as the others looked on. Gently, I dropped my chin on his elbow and stared up. Baba greeted this with a kindly grin and went on as usual. Doubtless in some way this startled the newcomers—some who had learned to treasure every glance of Baba's as the highest blessing, others because it did not fit into any model of understanding they had come with. Perchance, I thought ironically to myself, I resembled a watersnake basking on some rock, head stationary, eyes moving around. "Don't cop out of the cold region," a familiar voice rang out in my head.

In case I appeared as a "teacher's pet" to the group, a position I always detested, I reminded myself that to them this most tame and muted Tal was the same one who, merely hours ago, had roared at and redressed Fred, a relative newcomer, like a marine sergeant for the neophyte's audacious "imp of the perverse." I had spotted him with a silly grin on his face mounting the stairs of the physics room on all fours, looking for a place to sit. It seemed he was mocking Baba by not conducting himself on ashram property in the dignity befitting a devout follower. Often he had the same silly smile. The aggressiveness of my rebuke had unsettled him considerably. Nearly all of them, at one time or another, had seen me in the role as prefect and leader. The other side of the coin was the outright honour of being at the front beside Baba's chair facing the group, a most honoured privilege.

Baba ridiculed the buffoonery of the world. I watched to see how the newcomers would take this. A few uncertain smiles emerged. My spiritual diary noted that there was "loads of battery charging." Then a comment settled an important issue for a few minds present. "Too much LSD, you go crazy." The group knew well of the story of Ram Dass consecrating a piece of hashish, and giving it to Muktananda to chew. We were also well aware of the continuing tendency of that branch of American disciples to incorporate LSD in its campaign for enlightenment. Sure enough a comment followed suit about Ram Dass. "Too much LSD had made his mind unstable like an old woman. Now he is out collecting devotees when he himself is only a devotee. He is a bhakta, that is all, not a guru. When he comes here, complete change. Not name and fame, but same. Like all my other devotees."

"And Mr Freedom, now complete finish." Baba was referring to Gill, something that I had wondered about earlier, whether he would in some manner define Gill's status before the others. He and I eyed the Blake crew. They were expressionless. Baba continued, "Also going around like a guru. Outer show, not inner love, delusion." Baba smiled at me as he imitated Gill's standard hatha yoga *tapasya*, the grimly set jaw, breathing slowly. Some of the girls giggled nervously.

A flushed teary-eyed Baba giggled profusely as he shared another erroneous path. This time Bhaktivedantas' "Hare Krishna" movement, with its sombre anemic-looking shaved skulls rattling their bells and hypnotically chanting. "Now newspapers tell the complete story."

"Which one Baba?"

"Eh? Enquirer, National Enquirer." Baba shared a truth, that if something was founded on falsehood, truth would always catch up with it in the end to lay bare the lie. "Now complete immorality. Hare Krishna meetings in California . . . chanting in the nude." Baba laughed, "That's right. Even newspaper has photographs. Very bad." He looked serious. "So bad, even I had to throw away. Not allow my devotees to see them."

Baba's rasping voice chuckled the question at us. "Is this

Divine?" And Baba tilted his head back like an Arab drinking arak out of a spouted urn in a steady stream, thumb pointing to his mouth. "No, deep wine!" And he laughed.

The final brunt of his humour was Sri V.V. Giri, the former President of India, whom Baba had seen within the last few days when a famous political devotee had asked Baba to pay tribute to his gathering of notables at a conference dinner. Along with Baba was Dr Bhagavantam, India's top physicist, now being used by Baba in the role of a translator.

Giri, like many renowned mortals, was obnoxiously arrogant, and so blinded by this, that in effect, he was unable to see who Baba was. Again Giri appealed to his fellow statesmen, in a formal address, to press on with the urgency of population control. Perhaps somewhat mutedly Baba challenged the President of being an unworthy example of the population philosophy he espoused by having "eleven children himself."

Baba laughed as he reached this part, pretending to be senile and half deaf in portraying the seventy-year-old statesman who strained to hear Baba's words with "Waaahhh? Baba had his hand cupped up to his ear. Bhagavantam, India's scientific emissary to the U.N., was shaking in his boots at that point. But the President backed down from what might be a challenge from Baba, and by the end of the festivity, spent considerable time talking with Baba, becoming more and more humbled by the superhuman powers of this most bold and omniscient creature in the red robe. Giri would soon be coming to see Baba. And on this awesome note, the interview ended in the midst of the one who could be so strong, bold, and even divinely punitive with the mightiest men of the world, and yet, so endearing with us. What a Christ-like credential that, I said to myself.

In six days, on 10 May, the Blake crew took a bus towards town, disembarking outside the Bangalore airport, a modest air-strip with an almost cosmopolitan veneer to it, and that air of travel and adventure typical of all airports. Baba was about to fly to Bombay for a tour. And to our surprise, so was a whole squadron of the American bhaktas.

Many of the girls we saw at the airport restaurant in saris and make-up, chattering exuberantly about the planeride with Baba, and who would sit where, till the loudspeaker announced their departure. In fact when Raja Reddy and I would lean against Baba's station-wagon, and wave to Baba as he boarded the glistening bird, I would be informed that Baba and a small group of select Indians would occupy the roped off front quarters of the plane, dispelling the fantasies of the girls who would be confined to the rear of the plane. No one knew how long Baba would be gone but the average guess was a week. Lined up for him by Indulah Shah, Bombay's Minister of Transport and Communications, would be the largest stadium in Bombay. All of us wondered whether Baba would honour Muktananda's invitation to visit Ganeshpur for some special event. As it turned out, more important things would fill the agenda of the world avatar.

The airport settled one thing. My recent trip to the Malabar coast had by no means quenched my thirst for a change of scenary. When the proposition came that we join some of the other American bhaktas on a temple pilgrimage, reluctantly, almost defeatedly, I packed my bag. That Friday, 14 May, several of us headed towards Mysore city on an abominably slow narrow-gauge train. With us was a host of college-level girl cadets. It took no great inquisition for me to realize that some of my thoughts were unspeakable, well-nigh depraved. Were he with us, I could just imagine Surya Das drumming up hatha yoga classes for the girls. Our shared wisdom with the curious girls revealed that many of their families distrusted Sai Baba. Excitedly, we defended Baba's case. Our destination was the famous Baba temple where Vickie and Anthony had gone with Kasturi a year before, reputed widely to be a centre of miraculous happenings.

When we arrived, my diary described it as a "cartoon."

Down the highway several hundred yards and there it was, Baba's temple, sitting by a large, wide, rock-filled river, the Kaveri.

And so we walked around Srirangapatnan for the next two days, with its famous temples, river, near-by jungle and assorted sights, including a government park moulded out of one part of the jungle. Other times we rested, meditated, and chatted with the temple-keeper in the compound. By the time we left, the keeper (an ex-convict, with quite a life story) had given us a full tour of everything, the best accommodations in the main guest-house. We filled our hankies with the famous divine oil that exuded out of the stone Baba feet under a glass case at the river shrine, took the temple *vibhuti* that materialized on the large pictures, and were given several quarts of the famous divine nectar, *amrit*, that continually flowed .out of a tiny Baba ring into an urn.

What would come out of the Srirangapatnam trip was my conviction that I should return alone within a week or two, and use the stunning residence rented by Phil and his family, so elegantly tucked away in the jungle, indeed down a palatial drive, to finish the final chapter of my book. A talk with the area superintendent would affirm this, giving me a remarkable suite for a mere forty cents a day. By then, Phil and his family would be gone, and for most of the time the five or six other suites would be empty. So too, perhaps enhancing my writing with an extra magical touch would be the coming monsoon season, reminiscent, I comment to myself, of some nineteenth century scene of British colonial Bengal out of a family by Satyajit Ray. Or perhaps, on the banks so pristine a jungle river, with vines, creepers, monkey tribes, and tall pink storks, a scene out of the life of Jim Corbett. The one disillusioning precaution was the inevitable wet black bodies of cobras flooded out of their holes and left to squirm in the rain, foliage, and wet underbrush.

Mysore, I would finally breathe to myself in the relief of my return, alas, so good to be buried in the private enchantments of your verdant forests and tropical foliage, full of aromatic mists and enigmas of sound. Yet whether it was the expedience of the up-front technique or the combined supernatural influence of Baba's reign, I had yet to complete the heaves, birth pangs, and transmogrifications of some internal process before I could quite embark on that final chapter. That constant quiet-room of sadness and mourning within me had to go, the nagging doubts, the wondering where all the bliss was, and the pin-pricks of conscience from passages of Biblical scripture, once uttered by the Carrolls, searching through my soul. I had to face up, finally, to the full implications, if I truly believed what I believed, that—ye shall be as God, that finally, with a sigh, yes, after all, I am God. Said wrongly, the voice of self-assertion might be somewhat imperious, like an impatient British Lord asked for his passport one too many times by the Malaysian customs office. Or, try the voice of Rex Harrison "grown accustomed to her face," for the first time, announcing a hearty three-gun proclamation.

After a mere eight days in Whitefield I was back alone in Srirangapatnam for a seventeen day stretch of absolutely gruelling concentration, reflection, and writing. I would, before leaving, have some searching talks with Wendel (back yet again) and the Blake crew. And finally, I would get through to Baba, now in great demand ever since the Bombay tour, a huge success of filled stadiums and surging crowds. I would run into the superintendent of police with a copy of my booklet circulating through Assam and Northern India, *The Cosmic Confrontation*, assuring me that my residence permit would be extended for another year while I autographed his copy. This time my journey to Srirangapatnam would be by luxury coach, and my reading matter would be several sensational Life magazine serials of Norman Mailer's "Fire on the Moon," to be a book. This would give me access to the "global mind" and its most recent frontier with the hopes that I might find something therein and say, "Yes, I've been projected into this future the day before, in some colloquium of the gods before my birth, and here is where it all unfolds."

I disembarked on the main road leading to Mysore city, on the outskirts of Srirangapatnam, then walked into the jungle away from the village, down a richly foliated drive with a well-cut median towards a large white mansion with pillars and wide stairs, now virtually empty but for a handful of servants. I had just made it in time to retain my suite, Saturday, 22 May, the date agreed upon. The suite, a main one in one corner of the building, front and river, was stupendous by my standards, with two huge rooms, high-ceiling fans, a rug, canopy-bed, British dining room table, chairs, sitting area, and marble tiled bathroom and shower.

A side porch opened out to face the river bank. The setting was like a cell to the past glory, of aristocracy and nobility, the genealogy of conscious traditions of men; that very mentality from which I had once come, that in actual fact made me an heir to "The Society of Cincinnati" an ultra elitist, "wasp" circle, that no *nouveau riche* could buy his way into, for admission was by direct descendence from staff members of George Washington's revolutionary staff. I couldn't really take it seriously but what had stuck in my mind were the trembling bedside whispers of relatives and family about former greatness and nobility of heritage. Though the degree of trembling would usually vary according to my daytime acts, often construed perhaps as a spurning of my ancestry.

Yet the very heirdom I now sought to conquer was no less than the very dominion and eternity of deity himself, a slope that has made the greatest men in history stagger in blindness and stumble in the intoxicating headiness of its very proposition, "Do you prefer to be related to kings and princes, or would you rather it be God Himself?"

If the give and take in the game had been enthralling thus far, in a sense nearing the crest of choice I had taken an entire lifetime to reach, the final ante in the pot before the hidden cards could be revealed, required nothing less than all I had and was. One literally jumped into the pot clutching his soul as that final ante, awaiting the verdict. If he has won, then truly he has been God all along and he has inherited, rightly speaking, the entire universe as his due. If not, then what is to follow is out of one's hands and the coming descent into. . . Tehom, the abyss founded before the foundations of the world for the elemental spirits of the universe, the outer darkness, yet to come . . . the lake of fire, also yet to come, is now no more reversible than a tiny speck of a figure plunging off the Chicago Trade Center seconds away from impalement on a guard rail, police wagon, or cement pavement. The wind whistles as the body plummets, while the full thrust of one's entire act causes the mind to go wild with feeling it never dreamed it could contain, the cardinal realization being that repentance from the void will gain no more than a sardonic chuckle from a ring of dark hosts, aeriel beings, who doubtless egged on his jump, themselves long fallen in the crusts of eternity past, who are also without hope. After the jump, the fate is sealed: either that the loss is merely the transient ego in exchange of everything, or the soul itself in exchange for something worse than nothing.

Before writing, I had two priorities reading Mailer and writing a letter to my father. To me, Mailer's highest perception was at the space vehicular assembly plant at Cape Kennedy, that amongst the light years of electronic circuitry, the balance of human destiny hung precariously in what might be some massive war between God and the Devil, of which the outcome much depended on how mankind tipped the balance (clearly, a deist view). The behemoth of celestial mechanics ready for space, the very engines of hardware and computer software, were somehow the very entrails of God, whom, by the very nonchalance and humanist pride in our handling, we were blaspheming. Perhaps in some remote corner of his brain, Mailer feared damnation.

And so it would go for seventeen days of stoic discipline, perhaps writing eight to ten hours a day, thousands of words a day, and thinking until my head was about to split open. Since no meals were served in the mansion, I would cook one meal a day, rice and dal, on a kerosene-stove in the back porch. Supplies I would get at the local village of Srirangapatnam. Two or three times a day I would need a break. Often I would go down the river and swim way out in the middle, eyeing the foliated banks of palms, papaya, mango, and eucalyptus trees, pink storks, and roaming tribes of monkeys. If my head was really thick, I would take a cold shower and then walk to the ancient temples alone on the other side of the village, the stuka gates looming into the sky like many tiered wedding cakes of carved stone.

There, I might stand in the large empty temple court-yard at twilight, as dark thunderhead shifted across the firmament like chariots. And crimson streaks from the horizon gave an orange cast to the thousands of intertwined deities enjoined, dancing and beckoning, from the rising stuka gate, tier after tier, fifty or sixty feet into the air. Then I might find myself reflecting and soul-searching. So I would walk the empty lawn between the tremendous granite outer walls dotted with black crows and the immense granite center temple, a grey plain-faced fortress in the tradition of those forbidding temples at Karnak and Thebes. After a bit, I might stroll within, past wizened old brahmins in the gusty central corridor, musty with ancience, down into the subterranean acres of canlde-lit corridors, by fifty shrines of shining metal gods, through whisps of sandalwood incense, to some central god, the temple diety, a granite reclined figure fifty feet long, surrounded by robed priests chanting away, and a small cluster of pilgrims bowing down offering coconut and alms. I might lean against the wall, unfocus my eyes and take it all in. Or I might lean on the railing and study the god. Either way, I was fully accepted by the priestcraft as a pilgrim and mystic. Occasion if the whim hit me, I might buy a coconut from a cripple at the outer temple ally gate, and break it at the feet of the god. Then back, I would stroll through the cavernous cool corridors, stopping at each strange god to quietly stare through the bars of the shrine, to study it as one would at the Smithsonian. So far this seemed from the real level of enlightenment, so dream-like, so astral, so full of imaginations, and phantasmic planes. Indeed, so sadly lost, I would wonder why they ever built such forbidding shrines, as imprisoned celibates and androids babbled away strange Sanskrit mantras to stone monsters, their lives a continual mechanical prayer, eyes ever more glazed, the spirit, by all appearances, frighteningly devoid of life, exuberance and spontaneity. More akin, I might morbidly observe, to the product of a Russian underground brainwashing camp. Not ecstasy, certainly not that. And that's why, I would say to myself, my writing was such an urgent breakthrough, not into these dead yogas of epochs past but a new handwriting of God for this century. Something contemporary, yet timeless, vital, and routed in the never-ending principles of Vedanta. But God forbid that America fall into this, well, idolatry?

So ancient India spoke to me through her gods about the sacred mission of my writing, and its age-shattering significance, along with other human channels of the age. The spontaneous formation of words, like a mantra, would flow out to all the world due to the very potency of the words. But only that leap, I knew, and nothing else would make me the acceptable vehicle. Yet these very temple-gods themselves were a stumbling block; and I assumed that the "illusion" only became progressively more offensive to drive the aspirant more desperately, no matter how alien the territory, to find the answer. And right now one of the stumbling blocks that I would have to break through before I could defend it to the world were the very gods of India themselves. And when I walked away from one of these drafty black monoliths, the voice of one of the Carrolls would run through my head, and it might be, "You shall not make for yourselves idols, nor shall you set up for yourselves an image or a sacred pillar, nor shall you place a figured stone in your land to bow down to it; for I am the Lord your God." (Leviticus 26:1), directly from one of their open Bibles. My challenge was considerable.

Then one morning, perhaps before dawn, several days later as I sat at a large oak dining room table covered with muslin, my typewriter before me, and stared out of the main window of my suite to the rain pitter-pattering on the freshly mowed mall where the jungle stopped, I had, in a flash, a direct inspiration from some stupendous source. The final chapter would be guided by a five stage poem, which was the first factor out of the ordinary, since I never wrote poetry. Automatically, at the typewriter, I started the first poetic "vision," "Chaos."

Kali: Vision One

KALI, ONE IN A FORMIDABLE GUISE, IS A COUNTRY, SPECIFICALLY AMERICA. A DANCING SHIMMERING GEMINI, HER PULLULATIONS OF HIGH ELECTRIC FROM THE SCHIZOPHRENE CREATRIX THAT SHE USES TO GIVE BIRTH TO INNOVATIONS THAT ARE AWESONE, TERRIBLE, GROTESQUE, AND UPON, OCCASION, VERY VERY BEAUTIFUL.

THE PARAMETERS OF HER BEING PROGENERATE AND EXPEL OUT FROM THE FORMLESS AND INTO THE FORM, AND THEN FORM IS INGESTED, LIKE CHRONOS DEVOURING HIS CHILDREN. THESE FORMS ARE WILD AND HERETIC. THEY ARE AS AUDACIOUS AS THE TINKERY-TOY NEONS OF LAS VEGAS AND THE BACTERIOPHAGE HOUSING PLAZAS OF POLYSTERENE WAFERS AND CONCRETE DOUGHNUTS.

KALI, BEDECKED IN A GALAXY OF CHEVROLET LIGHTS AND CHROME STRIPS, PERFUMED WITH PHENIL HYDRAZINE AND IONIZED SMOG, LACED WITH THREADS OF SUPERHIGHWAYS AND EXCRUCIATING BOULEVARDS, SPEEDS UP THE HIGH TENSION CABLES OF HER NERVES WITH NEW ISOTOPES. IN THE MURKY DIN AND FANFARE OF JACK HAMMERS, BULLDOZERS, SIRENS, AND TRAFFIC CACOPHONIES, SHE EXUDES FROM HER MILLION UTERI THE PLAYTHINGS OF HER CHILDREN, IN THE MATERNITY WARDS OF DETROIT, CHICAGO, MINNEAPOLIS, MILWAUKEE, AND PITTSBURGH. SHE PEERS BACK AT HER CHILDREN THROUGH LASER CRYSTALS, CATHODE RAY TUBES, SONAR, AND RADAR, AND LISTENS TO THEM IN THE AIR WAVES AND THROUGH THE CIRCUITS AND WIRES, AS THEY COMMUNICATE IN CODE.

KALI IS BURYING HER CHILDREN IN TECHNOLOGY, DEVOURING AND BEHEADING THEM IN VIETNAM, AND RESURRECTING SOME OF THEM THROUGH THE SUN DISC OF DISILLUSIONMENT. SHE IS OFFERING THEM A STRANCE MYSTICAL VISION AND IS UNITING THEM IN TRIBAL COMMUNITIES ON THE PRECIPICE OF REBIRTH. MANY OF THESE CHILDREN MIGHT WELL SEE THROUGH THE VEIL, AS HER COSTUMES APPROACH UTTER UNBEARABILITY.

Then, over the days, the rest surged forth as quickly as I could write.

"...The war and post-war children of America were brought up in a sterile white world where society was determined to dominate the mysteries of nature and control all and everything. Things that did not conform to already existing models of society were sledge-hammered into contrived boxes and slots or semantically labelled and erased beyond recognition. Pragmatism and the new logical positivism sought to anodize and vinyl spray paint the grand eerie old cathedrals, it sought to put sodium vapour lights in every nook and crany that contained hints of intrigue and signs of wonder . . . .

"And so the mystical in man quietly developed in the war and post-war youth of the television world, like some super intuitive mantra used to invoke the reassuring memories of higher realities. They uttered these mantras through the wild signs of their inner directed creativities, unburying myths, legends and the preternatural."

Kali: Vision Two

THROUGH THE SUN DISC OF DISILLUSIONMENTS, KALI HINTS AT UN-LIMITED POSSIBILITIES AS SHE SCOURS HER CHILDREN AND PURIFIES THEM IN THE INTOLERABLE RADIATIONS OF HER ENDLESS THERMONUCLEAR LABORATORIES OF CIVILIZATION.

BURYING THEM IN A GARISH CORNUCOPIA OF OPULENT SHOW PIECES AND TOYS THAT CRUMBLE, SHE DISMEMBERS THEIR GREED WITH THE ANOMIE OF PERPETUAL DISSATISFACTION.

SHE INVADES THE FUMIGATING STENCH OF CAMPHOR FLAKE DESIGN, TORTURES THE SUBURBAN COMPLEX UNTIL THE CUBICLES OF FALSE IDENTITY AND ROLES COLLAPSE, AND THEN SHE DISINTEGRATES THE MACHINERIES OF SHYNESS IN HER CHILDREN TILL THEY LUNGE OUT OF THE ICY WASTELAND INTO THE COMPANY OF SHIVERING TRIBES OF THE HEART. IN SLAM BANG CONCUSSIONS, IN ELECTROCUTIONS, TO THE NERVE ENDINGS, AND IN SHOCK TO THE SENSES, SHE DRIVES THEM TO DETEST THE SURFACE CONTOURS OF HER FORM. INTOXICATED FROM THE POISONS THAT FLOURESCE IN HER VATS OF DECEIT, VERILY IN PARALYZED ISOLATION WILL THEY LIE AND SCREAM FOR DEAR GOD.

THE TANTRIC VISION

Kali: Vision Three

KALI, WITH UNFORESEEABLE CAPRICIOUSNESS, DISCLOSES TO HER CHILDREN THE REVELATION OF A PARTIAL GLIMPSE BEHIND THE MYSTERIES OF HER TOPOLOGY. SHE PRESSES OUT INTO THE SKIES THE ENTIRE PANORAMA AND PARADOXICAL END-POINTS OF HER MOST EXQUISITE AND APPEALING SENSATE DELIGHTS, AS THEY QUIVER IN CLEVER DESIGN CONCEALING AN ABYSS OF MISERY.

THROUGH THE PROJECTION LENSES ON THE OTHER SIDE OF

ATOMS, KALI DISPLACES THE MOVIE FILM OF EXTERNALIZED PHENOMENA, BEFORE THE EYES OF HER DEAREST CHILDREN, AND REVEALS DAZZING UNADULTERATED PURE LIGHT. SHE SILENCES HER CHILDREN IN A MOMENT OF AWE AS THE GROANING CELLULOID BEASTS OF THE OUTER WORLD FINALLY LOSE THEIR MAGICAL POTENCY.

SUCH CHILDREN OF KALI SIT PERCHED ON THE EVE OF A FINAL REBIRTH, THROUGH THE CAUSAL NEXUS, TO BEYOND THE BEYOND.

With the incalculable force that radiates from Baba today, I dare say that there is no authority or doctor living in the present world who could stand face to face with Sai Baba, look him in the eyes, and get away with denouncing or invalidating, or labelling, or blaspheming him; he might try it after he leaves Baba, and all the crap and bitterness in him cloud him over—and all the cowardice and smallness takes him over completely. Yes in the privacy of a New York hotel he might try it, but not in Sai Baba's physical presence.

If Satya Sai Baba were to go to the Lawrence Radiation Laboratory at Berkely, or the Lab at Stanford, or the Fermi Laboratory connected with the University of Chicago, and if he were to be celibrated and then put on a large scale atomic balance where his weight would be noted to the last microgram (millionth of a gram), and if then and there, before the key physicists of the world and in front of CBS and NBC television cameras, he were to materialize ten, twenty, thirty, forty pounds, yes even a ton, of any substance known to man (which he can most assuredly do), anything from chunks of plutonium, to intricately etched diamond spheres, to ash . . . it would explode around the telecommunications media of the entire world, and cause pandemonium of a kind not seen since the last world war. Keep this in mind and be certain that the logical positivist philosophy of America and the rest of the western world is standing on its last legs and will soon have its final golden anniversary, through the advent of a phenomenon that it could not have possibly considered, namely, the active force of God, God when he operates through the highest physical body referred to as an Avatar.

After a few more pages, I would grind down to a halt, reaching a temporary impasse. The final section of the chapter, "The New Beginning," would be the most demanding, requiring greater shifts of allegiance within me to this creative source. In short, I was faced with what Gill had termed "the cold region."

Whether I was writing, walking, reflecting or going to sleep, a requiem seemed to play quietly in my soul. It spoke of the very cessation of my life with such certainty that living memories were already being eulogized and stored away in some vault of the dead. When I now said, "goodbye green hills of earth," it was not the distant echo of before. The muffled drum, the passing bell approached, not to announce the death of my body but rather an eternal slipping away of that mutable awareness that I had always taken to be who I was, the individuality and personality of Tal Brooke; what would come in its place, or be revealed, and how the me that was "in office" could benefit from this, was a mystery behind a closed door. For now, with a certain remorse, I would wave goodbye at the parting gate to all that had ever seemed to matter, the pith and core of sentimental longings embodied to coin a certain phrase, in the remembrance of things past.

Should I be strolling through town several miles away, after an afternoon's writing, the knell of anthems past reviewed events in my life associated with them, comprising a sort of grand finale. King Crimson's "In the Wake of Poseidon," meshing with "Everyone's Gone to the Moon," and various recent songs: "Long Time Gone," "Eight Miles High," a recent one, "Cinnamon Girl," by Neil Young, another recent one, *ad infinitum*, back through "John Wesley Harding," "Axis Bold as Love." Then the classical phase; Prokefiev's, "Romeo and Juliet," Handel's "Messiah," tunes by Benjamin Britten, and Brahms, flowing through bits and pieces from the Bruckner symphonies and Wagnerian operas. And maybe a nostalgic humerous aside such as, "When You Begin the Beguine." I might snicker with a certain grim humour that the latter melody was the favourite song of Meher Baba (and not the "dawn Raga" or some celestial tune), who demanded that it be played at his funeral. By an hour or so of wandering, the melodies would become progressively more insipid, things like, "Scotch N' Soda," "A White Sport's Coat," and by the time I got to some God forsaken rhumba in my head—tubes, bells, chimes, and an electric xylophone—I might finally stop and announce to the mute bystanders on the road, "It's beginning to sound like Muzak around here."

Usually some visual obscenity would evoke the really bad musical scores. At one point, I stopped to see a bony, hairless, sore infested dog kneading its way over cow dung on two thin front legs. As it struggled along painfully, it would pass one group of tormentors after another, usually ferocious local strays, growling and nipping at it from one area to another along the road. By then I would be playing something along the lines of "It's Bunty the Bounching Bassoon," or "Old MacDonald Had a Farm," on a moog synthesizer, perhaps in the tradition of Emerson, Lake, and Palmer.

But if such unpleasantries pricked the mind of "Rowdie," or "Talie," or "Tal" it was little more than a contributing spark to a raging fire deep within me, one that had smouldered much of the time, while at other times, leapt into a full conflagration. As always, the fire only flared up on that anvil of God where I was pressed to make leaps. This time to be able to write; and my present determined leap required that I finally say, "I am God." Which was no less than the terrible struggle of a man with a spastic arm attempting to guide it with an equally uncontrollable arm so as to write with a fine quill pen. Surely, I knew in my heart, my latest resolve involved my doing something or saying something that all of my my life I swore was unthinkable. Therefore little wonder that I pleaded for supernatural intervention to fortify my resolve and help launch me. And it came. During the pre-dawn hours of 5 June, a Sunday morning, an occult dream invaded my mind with a powerful message. Indeed, so soul-rending was this, one of a handful of such dreams to come in my life, that my quiet shedding of tears lasted throughout the duration of that grey rainy morning. No small thing, since I was never the one to cry, almost able to count the time on my fingers and toes for my entire lifetime, and most of those times had to do with private loves.

In fact during the dream it seemed that my mind and soul were peeled back, and my eyes held open as I stood on a high ledge and watched the events flow helplessly by. In some inner chamber I could almost sense a gigantic spirit with a censor, for the first time, fully beaming down on me during these hours of decision, like some early hours rite in Brindavan just for "Talie." But the paralyzing clincher was that the evidences within the dream fell down to the last atom on both sides of the balance and rather than the issue being resolved, it was heightened in its frightening magnitude. For a part of me would feel the love of Baba all the more and repent of its doubts, realizing that it was through the divine focus of Baba that I was taking this walk into the night, the other part of me would detect something going on beneath the machinery of the dream that was from a familiar source. Of whence it came there would be an amnesia clouding my mind—but like an amnesiac seeing the source of his trauma and not identifying it beyond an "irrational fear" so too I would feel a warning chill. One might liken it to smelling a thick pungence of cinnamon in the air but, again and again, detecting a hint of chloroform, or carbon monoxide, or tenus leaves underneath.

THE DREAM

Part One

It is in the future; at some multiple location. In Washington D.C. at some huge Holiday Inn, yet also on the Nile river in Cairo, both places that I have been to before. It is in the evening.

I pull off a ramp into a large Holiday Inn type parking lot absolutely filled with cars. I am late for something or other. Along with me are Kerry and Janet and a few other Baba devotees from the early days. As we rush through the crowded lot, the entire panoramic building complex is absolutely teeming with activity. In one wing, a huge buffet dinner, in another, several dining rooms are serving dinner for hundreds, all Baba devotees, all, by the colours of their badges, at various levels of closeness to Baba. Through a huge plate glass window, as I approach the electric doors, I am able to glimpse Baba's form, hurriedly passing along a banquet table. People stop chewing and hold up their hands. Baba is in the impersonal mode, and apparently very busy. Only the most urgent matters will engage his attention. With him are Raja Reddy and a few others whom I don't recognize. I have absolutely no idea what colour badge I will be given, nor how long it has been since I have seen Baba, nor where I stand in the "inner circle" if at all.

The size of the function brings to mind political conventions at the Chicago Hilton, or corporate conventions at the really big hotels in New York. And these are the elect. Lesser devotees throughout the land are celebrating together variously.

I enter, and am separated from Kerry and Jenet, being ushered through lobbies, corridors, vast dining halls, through more plush, smaller, and more exclusive dining rooms, to the very elite area where a gold-black badge is pinned on me. It is obviously among the most precious and esteemed badges.

Baba enters the dining room amongst swirling valets and messenger boys. Trembling American dignitaries, of all aspects of fame, are at bay just to get a word in with Baba. He passes them by. My boldness of approach is no different from that of the India days. I mask all uncertainty, pressing to the limits that I have a special son-like relationship. Baba busily acknowledges me saying a few hasty words, but his manner is mere remote. He quickly moves on. It may have been a command; it may be that I am to go through something very important, as though the final chance to pass an exam of some sort.

My body automatically begins moving hurriedly out to the parking lot. My soul and mind look helplessly on as some other force guides the machinery of my arms and legs. I get into the car and speed out, now a temperate drizzle, through night-time boulevards and a maze of ramps and flashing lights. Along the river's edge, it becomes more like the Nile. In an industrial dockside area, down cobblestone alleys, there are a number of huge granite buildings that, though appear to blend in with the rest, evidently have been camouflaged. In fact, they are thousands of years old, remnants, as it were, of the monumental cryptic chambers of ancient Egypt, huge vaults of stone. I enter one dingy doorway of a vast grey building composed of ten ton seamless blocks that without windows climbs five storeys high. The only ornamentation is a half-moon roof that looms against the brownish fog.

Inside the very warehouse walls themselves are hidden stairs to the upper vaults. I enter upon the landing of ancient stone and am ushered by a guide to a doorway twenty feet high. It is directly from Thebes or Karnak. A power swings the door open then swings it ajar behind as I enter.

I join a chanting line of initiates in the dark shadows. They appear stupefied. We are all facing a high priest. The flickering light is from two black sulphur candles at the altar, revealing the chamber to be quite large. The priest has a distinctly Fu Manchu appearance. His companion priest is now quite familiar. I recognize him as the Principal of the Veda School in Puttaparthi, the little gnome-man with burning eyes. The butterflies in my stomach are in a nauseous terror, sensing the anvil of choice.

Standing above us at least fifteen feet high against the altar walls are two stone giants that can be found either at the British Museum, the Cairo Museum, or the tomb of Ramses the Second, they are Seth and Anubis, the Egyptian god of evil, and the jackal god of the necropolis of death. The priest holds a burning censor as something tells me that it is tanus leaves burning. The hypnotic chants become more intense.

I now see that to our left, behind thick curtains, are circular stairs that lead to an upper chamber. A priest has pulled them open to beckon us on with a lit candle.

With helpless terror I am close to losing my mind. For suddenly, both granite giants, perhaps fifty tons each, have unglued themselves from the wall, and had now started to slowly edge forward with hideous strength. The gigantic feet sound like jack-hammers each time they hit the rock floor. A wind has entered the room from nowhere.

Then as the others, in a daze, move beyond me, I desperately calculate an escape. The priests move up the stairs as the two living statues slowly follow. One stops and searches through the crowd. My spirit fights with my body not to proceed but to escape in the waning moments of dim hope much in the same instinctive way that, in the heat of struggle, a mouse does not attempt to define what is going on as it dodges the beak and talons of a hawk. If part of me has had an instant to reflect though, the question to ring out in my mind is, "Why is it that everytime I reach this same gate, this narrow choice of initiation, that no matter how light, airy, loving, and innocent the pathway has been, the doorway, the rite, cannot be made in any other fashion than that which is unbelievably sinister to my deepest feelings, bearing a total resemblance to the very horrors that I most instinctively feared as a small child, the deepest things of Satan? Why does it have to be evil and not good or at least somewhere in between? Why never the bells of bliss? For, at the final moment, the carpet is pulled from under you, and you still have to pass through the fire and kiss the feet of some demon god, and only then pass through a tunnel that you can never see the other side of."

In the final possible moment, I gained control of my arms and legs, perhaps calling to Jesus of all things, and sped through the front door down the inner stairs with such nimble quickness that the somnambulistic procession could not stop me. Perhaps, miles or hours later, I stopped running.

Part Two

Evidently I had blown it, making the wrong choice. Apart from Baba, a voice indistinguishable from my own conscience would proclaim, there is no salvation. Fie, fie, fie, I had lost faith in his love at the final moment and so had not followed the procession into a heavenly aerial immortal ecstasy.

Instead I have become a slave to lost passions once again, a mere speck compared to the great strong disciple I once was. Now without purpose I am back to doing these things I learned to detest the most, and vowed I would never do.

In a chic Georgetown apartment, Kerry and Janet are having a small gathering. All of us have left Baba. Frivolous conversation fill the air. We are all doing what we know is wrong, but cannot find the way out of it. Janet and I begin mocking and criticizing Baba in her kitchen. She is making hash brownies. Kerry comes in with a perverse grin, stoned out of his mind. "Hey boss king, take a toke of this. It'll transport ya alright." He chuckles the old Kerry ironic chuckle. "It'll take ya beyond the beyond and all that sort of crap to Sai Baba city and holy Bujamber Loka." It was DMT, and in a mood of impulsive despair, I stood in the centre of the room and inhaled the whole pipe full. My mind quickly vanished in a paralyzing haze of insanity. The rest of it, my spiritual diary tells succinctly.

"Finally I was on the sidelines (of Wisconsin Avenue in Georgetown) to watch the Baba parade go by. I was aching with love for God and sadness at the helplessness of being stuck where I was. Just then, Baba's carriage, a flower covered float resembling a sun, pulled by, and there he was right before me. It was too much. I became crippled with love, and collapsed on the pavement heaving with tears. Baba did what he had not done that day (in the entire parade). He stopped the procession, walked out on the deck of his float, then dismounted onto the street (interlocked police held the surging crowd back), came over to me, and spoonfed me prasad (food he has blessed). He patted me on the back and left, smiling at me the whole time (as the float moved down the street). I was ruined. When I woke up, tears were streaming down my cheeks." Here the red scribble in my diary becomes almost unreadable.

The next day I packed and went into Mysore city to find the bus to Bangalore. My spiritual crisis was still mounting to a vast inner war—as though a contest between God and Satan. Checkmate on the band of eternity felt to be only moves away. Some kind of inescapable choice was on the horizon, a final initiatory rite, and like the occult dream, my response was crucial. Would I or would I not bow before this force and enter the unknown tunnel? And was the end of it heaven or hell?

24

If the dream at Srirangapatnam had left me feeling that edgy, less god-like, sense of mortal vulnerability so definitive of a mere creature, that God-breathed speck of dust in Genesis, so often thrown about by the vicissitudes of the spiritual powers, a clue, but not "The Clue," appeared and changed the horoscope for a time. As I have said, amongst us there was a pool of many talents. On 7 June, just a day after Jerry and I returned to the Blake cabin, we encountered a new room-mate, Mark, who ingratiatingly asked me permission to stay on as he was beginning to feel a little ill of late, and needed people who could tend him. This was the same Mark who had come with Margaret and Barbara before the November birthday festival some eight months back, the one I had turned away from the rocket suite at Puttaparthi around the time so many of the American bhaktas were living on the roof following that unfortunate episode involving Baba's car and the human chain. By now a most familiar face and certainly more sensitive and intelligent than most of the others, he was a welcome brother amongst us. His straw mat lay near mine in the front room.

Caution urged me to proclaim him in sick bay, in case he was coming down with what Michelle had recently succumbed to, with a few others on the way, that most contagious and debilitating nemesis of the Peace Corps, yellow jaundice or hepatitis. It could eat up two-thirds of a human liver in weeks, killing a portion of those who had it. But unlike the Peace Corps, we did not have the funds to charter a whole plane back to the States, should one of our people be among that percentage who die from it.

Wendel and Phil had been amazed at the position of my stars, and a consequent tarot reading that was almost identical. The result was a growing fame among the westerners that, fitting the pattern of Baba's election of me, I was "Aquarius" with three "exalted" signs. Mark, whose peculiar talent involved going into some kind of mediumistic trance, shook and sweated as the readings came through the "Masters." As he stared at my planet signs and worked through the "houses," he was in awe between his seizures of rapid speech. Some of his natural awe, in the form of Brooklyn exclamations, I censored as I typed what he said word for word. Would this help settle my crisis?

As the astrological voice spoke through Mark, the other Blake members sat silently listening nearby. The entire cabin was still very struck by my just having read the "Kali Visions." What was now coming from Mark inspired me as I recorded it, full of innumerable insights, major recurrent patterns, stirring proclamations and truths. The edicts of fortune seemed to renew me. The added warnings and revelations of my weaknesses and shortcomings challenged my imagination, and aroused an admiring curiosity. Once again, if a team of Hollywood screen writers were to get together and think up the ultimate horoscope here are some of the utterances: "Personality throughout life there is a general trend towards expansion . . . started up as (messed up) kid, but . . . there were occult forces that you could not contend with, no one understood them. You were super open and super sensitive to them." (This was true since in Haiti, in 1948, some of the black maids had relatives who were voodoo priests. Some odd things happened to me back then). "Your view of the world is to take cosmic wholes and analyze them. Digest the whole show. You do it by intuition. In the future you will enlighten science, perhaps change history of science through channelling higher forces. Fascination with death for the explosion all over the universe. Ego death in this life.

Super strong ego power in you. The Jovian intellectual king on the throne . . . the guy who likes the good life . . . intellectual arbiter of the whole world who is going to die. He is scared. The split is between hobnobbing with the good life, etc., (the journey to hell) the other part of the coin is the destruction of the personality that is seen as a sham. Knowing the oneness of it all, and wanting to blow it out. Uranus in Gemini; intuition of writing channelled right from the hierarchies, right from the masters. Mind is exploding with higher mind. Forty-watt bulb over-loading with millions of watts; very powerful, coming through public, immensely popular books. May quickly fade from public recognition . . . watch that. Will catch public imagination, novelty though . . . stumbling blocks will be powerful older friends, may make me wait at the gates. Main obstacles, mother: also women in general, beware of female deception and those who want to mother. Keep brahmachari. Hang up with women in past lives. In talking with people, you have to be on the upper hand, the sun, top dog. Love of dangers and motorcycles . . . be careful of dare-devil risks . . . could get (messed) up with daredevil transportation. Possible leg injuries . . Too serious, can't have any fun in life. Capricorn in the fifth house . . . relate to kids as an old man. The child in you is suppressed and buried very deep. As a kid you had to fight with belligerency. The child had to disguise by being the tough guy. It is as though your energy is directed at recapturing that lost childhood . . . childhood innocence is top of mountain. Fall in love with hauntingly beautiful women, follow that as through they were the key to the other world. Venus in Pisces, falling in love with the dream, the illusion."

"Sixth house: thank God, life is devoted to service to others. Hard exterior, soft interior. Yet incredibly sensitive . . . respond to forces other people barely feel . . . aware of other planes that others can barely feel. Quite possible that you will start some new kind of occult thing going. A new cycle in the occult.

"Ninth House: Taurus; legalistic, emotional legalism. Higher principles, what is fair what is just . . . justice is high sense, righteous indignation. Would prove my point by putting people through law suits. Interests all over the world. Past life kingship. You had something to do with seership. Visionary keys in the past. Power to look into the future. Problems with father, he was an obstacle. Heavy karma with family, chose to come to get rid of crap."

"Will be beacon of future change in the world. John the Baptist of America, voice in the wilderness. My planet is Jupiter . . . key of chart with uranus coming in second. You will not be visionary on the mountain but will bring it down into the world . . . . Masters are giving him so much power that he is not functioning . . . . the other person is very important in your life. Funnel coming from cosmos and infinity . . . through you to man on the street. Ego and destruction coming through you to him. Siva comes through you and dances upon the head of the average man. You are Siva. People will try to step you . . . problems with your father, perhaps discrediting you. Must not try to tear his heart out, rivalry power-game from the year one. He was your anemy."

"Mars—Saturn opposition. You can blow it by reckless streak. Could run some cat over at a hundred miles an hour . . . also reckless with words. Say things you do not mean. You could get some of the greatest words in history if you are good. But speak more sweetly, words are your weapon also. Could use this power for destruction or for good. A let of violence, very deep that explodes out. You are a volcano, a pranic one. The force that propels you to heights, the guy running the gauntlet, tremendous power and tremendous obstacles, that come in the form of older man. You have a hell of a time with authority. You want to cut the balls off the establishment . . . . Heavy stuff in the past. Had your fingers in many pies, some from much higher planes. Epic stuff like Tolkein. Not an earthly love, a love like an incredible inner plane thing. Good chart but a rough life, fascinating rough life; you will triumph over all the forces, tremendous intellect, power, energy, intuition. Against you are temper and incredible vindictiveness."

"If you get married, the person would not have to be human. I would expect her to be Venus coming out of the shell. Standards of another world."

Needless to say I was thrilled. It all seemed to fit what a part of me had been preparing for all my life. Mark's concluding comments as he came out of the spell were so full of respect and reverence that I was deeply touched. He really meant it. Sweating profusely he turned to me and said, "Heroic life, heroic proportions. If you could control your temper, you could have the whole world. That's what my source impressed me with. That is your trial. Get the detachment and compassion going. Then you will have so many siddhis you won't know what to do with them. I look at you and have to say that you are not a human being, you are a great being, and must have come here out of great compassion."

But as far as clues for the final chapter went, I had heard it all before and the temporary boost went away as readily as any transient mood. Within a few days the fires of inner warfare would be felt again as the dross of experience would try to be smelted out and the gold of pure unchanging truth retained. The drum beat, the passing bell continued.

By mid June all the brothers but Surya Das would begin moving back to main ashram at Puttaparthi by Baba's orders. Surya Das wanted solitude to get his head together, and I wanted solitude to finish that last chapter. Baba himself would be well-nigh unreachable throughout the month, travelling intermittently between Whitefield and Puttaparthi, but spending most of his time at the women's college in Ananthapur, now rapidly being completed. Thus to me there was even less impetus in suffering the heat and hardship in Puttaparthi when I had the cooler Bangalore, the cabin with Surya Das, and a greater sense of freedom and privacy.

By this time Mark's illness showed its ture jaundiced colours, and Mark was near Brigade Road in Bangalore at the Saint Philomenas Hospital. Surya Das and I visited him hooked up to bottles of glucose. He tried to smile and brave it. Soon he would have a Charan Singh follower for a room-mate, an American, and they would spend many endless tired hours on their backs comparing their masters. Mark would defend Baba as the avatar, his room-mate would defend Singh as the highest of masters. Fulfilling my expected leadership position, I would inform the lad that one invalidating thing about Charan Singh and his fellow disciple Yogi Kirpal Singh under their master Sawan Singh, was that they had started rival orders, continually backstabbed one another, each claiming sole succession to the guru, Mark disappointed me in lot being better able to defend Baba.

But by 20 June, I too was no longer able to effectively defend Baba in the face of this challenge. I made enigmatic statements to the hospital room-mates and used everything I had to keep from melting into tears of despair before their very eyes. You see "The Clue" had already appeared and it had begun to change my life.

I would no longer ever be the same. If I had fallen from grace, the fall had been total. If I had met my nemesis through "the Final Clue," I would never ever regain my former endearment to Baba. And that is the fact about change in he objective world; you can forgive and forget at times, but you cannot go back and undo what has taken place in time-space history. For me to undo and forcefully unknow that I now khew would require the risk of a grand lie on an unbelievable scale. I would have to do what only someone in a psychosis can effectively do and look at something and declare, with all the assurance in the world, that it was not there. Then, only then, would I earn the freedom to do with my mind as I wanted. The price: to be lost forever, for, having burnt every bridge of reason and sanity behind me, I would be past the doors of the house of mirrors, in the kline bottle, and there, would be no exit.

Verily, I would be the Laotian monk immolating himself in the fiery corona of red. That videotaped horror who at the irredeemable moment, well past the point of no return, might begin to twitch a little before the newsreel ends and before the public eye vanishes. And it tells them and it might tell us, sadly, that the emaciated little figure twitching in flames is paralyzed into an agony that might just last forever. It's the same twitching smile of the gang leader with a ten inch stiletto plunged well into his kidneys after travelling across intestines, stomach, and spleen. You bet it hurts, but just keep a poker face till your body drops away, then when all the onlookers are out of view, you can scream forever. God what a hell of a scream that's gonna be. Just you and the void, endlessly black, forever and forever. For was it not some prick upon my soul, should the words filter up from even one of my most liberal meanderings through "Revelation," to hear, and recall, "And I saw the dead, small and great, stand before God: And the books were opened; and another book was opened; which is the book of life. And the dead were judged out of those things which were written in the books, according to their works . . . . And whosoever was not found written in the book of life was cast into the lake of fire." (Rev. 20:12-15)

As a cloak of darknes was beginning to cover the desolate wilderness around the empty Blake cabin. I could hear Surya Das's steps near the front porch. It was late afternoon, 18 June, and I had had a fruitless day sitting alone in the cabin struggling for inspiration, while Surya Das had spent the whole afternoon, presumably, out wandering. I was hungry and I figured we would try to get supper together on the little kerosene stove, maybe dal, chapatis, and papaya, or maybe Surya Das had brought a surprise in his shoulder bag from the Whitefield market, perhaps even one of those rare cans of cheese. But when his form slowly lumbered through the dark porch into the living-room light, I knew instantly upon seeing his face as he flung back his shawl head-dress that there was a surprise indeed, but it had nothing to do with food. That the awesome burden of whatever revelation he had brought might be unbearable. He stood in the doorway, hand on hip, sighing, slightly shaking his head, the anxious depth in his black eyes carrying a look of silent tormented abandon. The kind of look I expect he had when he was a twelve-year-old lad living near Chattanooga, and heard that his parents had decided to divorce. The only word that he could get out of his mouth was a ponderous "Well . . . ," and I second guessed the rest with a tone of total certainty, " . . . I'm not going to believe what you're about to tell me."

"Right."

"It's going to totally blow my mind."

"Yup."

"It's about Sai Baba."

"You guessed it."

Acc. No. 9826
Date

My heart was beating furiously, my mind somehow in tune enough to be already arming itself for something fully as obliterating as my mountain-top LSD experience. I literally tried to get into the most optimal physical position to receive the shocking news. Maybe I should have stood up with folded arms, or squatted on the floor, or sat in a yoga posture on my mat against the wall. I finally sat across him in the centre of the room in familiar conference fashion. "Okay, let's hear the whole thing from beginning to end, every detail, don't rush to the crux of the thing without leading up to it."

"You know the tea-house in Whitefield, the one where a lot of the Anglo-Indian guys hang out?"

"Never been in there, but go ahead."

"Well, I went in there for some tea and ran into some of the guys whom I've talked to a number of times. I joined them, and we soon got on the subject of spiritual things. Well, they were sort of half interested. Then I got on the subject of Baba. They wouldn't say anything. I kept pressing it and they kept quiet. Finally Raymond and I went for a walk near the Carrolls. I kept pressing him. He was very quiet. I knew he had something to say, so I got his complete confidence. He asked me to tell nobody, to swear to keep this a secret that what he was about to tell me only two other guys knew, that not even his friends in the tea-house knew it, and furthermore, he was under an oath to his best friend, Patrick, not to tell a soul. He said he had a sudden feeling of responsibility for my soul, and that was why he was taking the chance, despite his legitimate fear of Baba's supernatural powers. That unprotected, he or his family might get destroyed, that there have been instances before of local people really being under a curse."

"Right, I know what you mean. Phil once dug up some unpleasant stuff among the local villagers of Puttaparthi regarding the original source of Baba's occult power. Something about an ancient lingam on a hill. But I didn't want to hear about it because there was no way to substantiate it, plus the obvious thing that it was probably a demonic ploy."

"Yup, well anyway, Raymond described to me how about two years ago, a few months before you met Baba, Patrick . . . . You know the one, the real good-looking Anglo-Indian with long hair and the sensual look. Yeah, the really good-looking, well-built guy who hangs around Whitefield . . . . Okay, well Patrick went to Brindavan one day, and sat amongst a whole crew of Americans who were just passing through town for a few weeks. Well, Baba thought that Patrick was one of the freaks from the States you know, because of his long hair and light skin. So he invited Patrick in for all the interviews he gave to the Americans."

"Uh-huh", I responded with a slow deliberate sigh.

"Well, one day after one of those interviews, Baba kept him over for a private interview."

I was going to keep silent for now, the only two people who knew about my own private interviews with Baba were Wendel and Phil, Prema's husband.

"Well," Surya Das said slowly shaking his head" . . . Aw man you're not going to believe this. But I'm gonna have to tell you anyway. At any rate, Baba treated him like he does you, you know, all the special attention beside the chair, addressing things only to him, smiling a lot. When all the others left and Baba got him alone, he did his usual number of materializing things and telling him his inner secrets, though I don't know why the devil he didn't know that Patrick just lived down the road. Well, next thing that happened was that in one smooth motion, Baba reached down and unzipped Patrick's fly, and pulled his tool out." Surya Das stopped far a long pause to let this one fully drop on me. Then looked up as though to say, "Okay, are you ready for this next one?"

"Well, when he worked Patrick up . . . Man I don't know why the guy just stood there and put up with this crap. In fact when I asked Raymond, all he said was that Patrick was only about seventeen, horny, perhaps a little naive, and I guess didn't give a blue jay what the other partner was. Maybe he was curious or just wanted to see the whole weird thing through, or maybe the kid's a bisexual. Though Raymond told me that Patrick is only interested in girls, and just may have and some what-ya-call liberal curiosity. How the hell should I know? But at any rate he worked up a bone alright, and the next thing that happened is really gonna blow your mind. Baba lifted his robe and inserted the thing. That's right. Maybe he's got a woman's organ and a man's organ down there. Yeah, a hermaphrodite. But he honestly inserted it. Patrick said it felt just like a woman."

I was chilled to the marrow, and really did not want to believe what I was hearing. The problem was that till then, I knew it was true. No finally it had gone too far. "Listen, if Baba had been a hermaphrodite it would have gotten out all over the neighbourhood. All Indian kids run around naked till they're five."

"I know, but maybe Baba's mom protected him or hid him, or hell, "it," yeah, that's right, "it," Maybe she was really careful with it. Or some of those people, what ya call neuters, can be latent for years, and only develop a labia after puberty. I don't know all the physiology. Besides, with all his supernatural powers, he's got a sort of weird body anyway. Maybe the guy just transmutes, you know, shifts his protoplasm around at will. At any rate, Raymond told me that just at the moment before Patrick was through, Baba pulled him out and collected his semen in a little white handkerchief."

"This is really too much," I remarked grimly, "Do you think it's some kind of a lie or hoax?"

"I wish to hell it was, but I get a total feeling that it's true.

The guy just was not lying. It was not a come-on. He was dead serious and scared. He was sticking his neck out. I know people and this guy was telling the truth. At any rate, let me continue. Baba collected the stuff, and then told him that the whole world lay in the palm of his hand, and that anything Patrick wanted, he could have. That Baba was planning a special position for him, like Raja Reddy. That Patrick could move in and live there, and be with Baba to spread his mission throughout the world. Suddenly Patrick didn't give a hoot. He may have even laughed and told Baba that he was from just down the road, and that he wasn't even an American. At any rate he stopped going and that was it."

"Okay," I announced despondently, "are you ready for this one?"

"I guess I'm as ready as I'll ever be. After this I could hear just about anything and it couldn't be any more shocking."

"By the way, before I go into this, I should tell you that among the guys whom Baba has already "purified," by pulling out the lingam, are: Wendel, Phil . . . Yeah, I know he's married but one day Phil confided this to me. And that's not all. There was the disciple of Yogi Bhajan, there was also "Alpine Schwartz," the tall dude with the blue ski cap. Yeah, he told Wendel one day at the Whitefied ice-cream stand how Baba materialized a japa-mala for him in a private interview, and how it had a white bug crawling around on it. Then Baba pulled his drawers down, handled it for a minute presumably to cleanse it of "heat." That's not all. There was also a guy who only passed through for a few days, and by the way, that's why. One day Wendel and I were at the Chinese restaurant off Brigade Road, and right at the table next to us, were Gordon, the jewel-cutter from L.A., and this guy from U.C.L.A. who I thought was blaspheming Baba. He was talking at full pitch describing to them how Baba was a "homo," how Baba got him in for one of those private interviews and pulled his fly down, and started to go to town. He said it scared the hell out of him, and he practically ran out from the place with his fly down. Baba chased him to the door calling him panic-stricken as the kid just left. Wendel and I just thought the guy wasn't matured enough to handle or transcend his own negative projections and cultural hang-ups. But then you've got to ask yourself, if Baba's omniscient, why does he pick people who're going to misinterpret it and blow the whistle on him?" I let this data sink in on him and continued, "But that's not all, there's one little card that I've been holding back on you till now. I myself am the main one of all of them. That's right, Surya Das, Baba has done it to me, and up till now. I have pretty much sworn the whole thing to secrecy, believing fully that it was a form of *tantric* purification, or if nothing else, a test, of allegiance." I described my final gruesome encounter with Baba during that fateful private interview in Whitefield which has been alluded to but which the reader does not know about in detail. We will let the matter rest here, with my only statement being that unlike Patrick, I did not respond. In fact I tried to keep my mind on the "clear light" assuming that I was being schooled on the unimportance and ephemeral irrelevance of the physical aspect.

Surya Das, like me, was in a shock. We got up and started making tea while wandering around in a daze.

"But there's another extra side of this," I added, "There is also an occult aspect about the semen. Check this out. One day I heard Phil's confession as we were returing to Whitefield on a bus. How Baba did to him what he had done to me. Thank God none of us even thought about getting it up. But what Phil told me, and you know he used to teach astrology at the Six Day School in Frisco, having been into it for over ten years, is the fact that semen is one of the most potent things used in really heavy occult stuff. The vital essence of life or whatever. Perhaps even Alistair Crowley used it. No doubt that's why there's such a heavy emphasis on sex in covens. But one thing Phil mentioned was that when he and Prema were going to have their second child they both vowed to stay celibate for a year and store up their seeds for what they call a "solar year." It is said that if you do this, you will pull into this world the highest soul imaginable to incarante into the body of your child, something on the level of a rishi or a master. You can also control their astrological chart somewhat by timing the conception. I think Phil's kid might be a solar year one, maybe that's why Baba has always taken him in. . . well, I'm not sure, we can even think that way any more. But if semen is invaluable, sperm stored up for a solar year must be about the most precious thing that someone who is into sorcery can use." And a chilly silence filled the air, "Think what kind of unsuspecting gold mine Baba might have in the Veda School lads. Several hundred kids disciplined severely into celibacy whom Baba uses as a kind of sperm-bank. Even then, Phil told me that he quite frankly suspected that such was the source of Baba's powers, sperm from the Veda School kids stored for a solar year." I went on to mention a dream I had a year before in Puttaparthi in which Baba went on an inspection tour of the Veda School urinals.

We sipped our tea humbly, while I felt my soul disintegrating. Little did I know of the long dark night of the soul ahead of me. For I would be under a dark cloud of unknowing for weeks, the constant pressure of despair pressing me to the outer limits of my endurance, that case-hardened intensity of will and inner resilience that had borne me through some rather strange places in the past. But if it cracked this time I knew the battle would be fully lost, for there would not be the slightest chance of navigating out of the abyss that I had gone so deeply into: certainly not without my sanity, in India, and particularly now that the invisible domain that I had allied myself to for so long was turning against me. More so if this legion had a full dossier on me, not to speak of the years of its inroads upon my mind. I wanted to run. At the same time I wanted to deliberate in case more evidence came in to show me that the whole thing was somehow a hoax. That was by far the preferable alternative considering I knew what I would be up against, and the kind of universe I envisioned entering. The trauma was so total that I just did not want to believe the facts if I didn't absolutety have to. Within a day we would try to get Patrick himself to agree to come by and tell us his first person account. The issues were too imporant not to. Many lives might eventually be involved, even millions of them.

We sat stunned as the night went on, talking constantly into the early hours of the morning. Sleep would not come before certain points were settled in our minds. Between our interchanges, we gaped at one another in shock, when we weren't reminding ourselves of such things as, "The bottom just dropped away from my entire life. Can you believe it, would you ever have believed it, Baba is a queer? Twenty-five years of being guided to this incredible peak, backed up by all kinds of complex life patterns, intuitions, omens and signs, an absolutely astounding philosophy, and so convincing is it, so positive are you that it is the truth, all culminating in Baba, that you invest all that you have and are into it, and one day, just in a second, it is all ripped away. Where do you go next, Las Palmas, the Caribbean? Do you just pack your bags and forget it ever happened? Stop thinking, like most people, and live the thoughtless hedonistic life waiting for the next floor to cave in? Never."

The consequences of our act would soon be felt by the others, and we knew that we had to deal with this immediately. The main obstacle in reaching the others was the impermeable blind faith closed system of belief, fundamental to the whole bhakta path. Even those dearest to us would predictably launch a counter-attack on our own validity. It had always worked this way before. I should know, I had done the same with Kerry, Janet, and Bruce, among others.

"We will have failed like so many other bright stars of promise who gave in to 'sensuality, ego, doubts, and weakness.' If it's our word against Baba's, you know who's word they're going to believe and it won't be ours." And sure enough, within a week I would feel some ground lost against my own credibility in the eyes of the others as Howard, in for a few days from Puttaparthi, would find me trying to escape the blinding anguish that was hard enough to contain much less to conceal. He would greet me with a well-controlled slightly triumphant "hello" as he would peer into the "studio room" of the Regent Guest House. I would be standing up with headphones on, eyes closed, swaying a little to the stereo sound of Neil Young, "Tommy" by the Who, "Eight Miles High" and "John Bye Lee" by the Byrds, to become the theme songs for this endless mood of despair, and finally Dylans "Nashville Skyline," with that contagious tune to go around in my head as I would roam the streets of Bangalore, "Girl from the North Country."

But even if the group invalidated us there was still a sore spot that they had yet to explain themselves. And that was Baba's blunder in bestowing so much grace upon candidates who would turn out to be a blotches on his record, who turn away disillusioned from him perhaps even broadcasting their grievance, real or imaginary, to the entire world. Seemingly this would be the opposite of the intended outcome from such close disciplining of two, as close as Surya Das and me. "Taly" whom he awarded the closest status for nineteen months. Known for, his zeal and faith, never known for an outward show of doubt who would suddenly turn on Baba as an enemy. Taly, who would have pamphlets circulating through Assam and northern India written about Baba from a model American disciple, who now had a huge project coming out of the presses of Calcutta in the form of book. You mean all that effort was for naught? The problem the American contingent had to deal with was explaining how the avatar, who sees perfectly above time, who knows everything that is going to happen, for he says so adamantly, could allow for so adverse and contrary an outcome. Why even the book would have to be scrapped as a bitter memory as it came out, and those reading it learned that the once great Tal Brooke who spoke to crowds and sang to them was *persona non grata.* Doubtless the Americans would take the situation as a divine test upon their own faith, translating me into a convenient fragment of maya.

The next afternoon Patrick and Raymond did come. Very sobered, less flippant then usual, his account virtually word-for word followed what Surya Das had told me the fateful eve before. When I told them all my story, they weren't surprised, and all that there was left for me to do was pace amongst them as they stared up from the floor, while I aired my thoughts. "Your account can't be contrived because if there's nothing else I know, one thing I do know, and that is that I have personally stood alone before Sai Baba with my pants down to my knees." All of us would depart, sworn to mutual secrecy till more data came in. Patrick would urge me to remain quiet, perhaps to protect his family, at least from disgrace, at the same time understanding my relentless quest for the truth at any cost.

On and on the gloomy days of June would stretch, desolation wherever I was. This state of occult desolation really cannot be communicated to the reader. If he has had it (I would expect one cut of many thousand to be a fair number), he will know and shudder; if not there is both a qualitative and quantitative jump to be made; for instance, describing to a blind man in Vermont—who has never seen a building, or an ordinary street in America, cannot picture anything over ten in his mind, and certainly not visually—the grey panorama of groaning bodies on the streets of Calcutta with surging crowds, Hindi street signs, cigarette billboards in Bengali, and cows wandering about fluttering their ears. Then assume he has no sense of smell, and you are also trying to communicate the blend of Bengali curry and sweet obour with a lot street smell. Such is the difficulty in trying to portray this terrible state. No, it is not like a death in the family, or a miscarriage or seeing an auto wreck. Its terrible power, let me suggest, comes through a spiritual doorway, and most people have no idea where it is and how far back there it is.

Surya Das did not take it quite as calamitously as I did yet he was in mourning all the same. Should the two of us, virtually oblivious of our surroundings, make our way along some road, slowly lumbering to deep sighs of indignation, a circular prison of thought would go on. "I feel like I'm dying inside. I just can't believe I've been with this guy for so long, trusting him completely, a guy who is worshipped by millions who don't even know that he's a . . . " and there would be a brief pathetic laugh, " . . . closet queen. Why I would get mobbed if I told them. This is weirder than the horror comics. He's up there on stage working miracles before their very eyes, claiming to be God almighty, and behind closed doors he's toyed with any number of " and there would be a pause like a punch line to a sick joke, "Siva lingams." My head would be hanging low, and Surya Das would ask, "Well, what are ya thinking of?" And I would look up and say, "That foul copulation, I just can't get it out of my mind." To him this would occasionally be funny. Not to me.

Another gruesome tidbit would roll in from Surya Das, "In fact on Mahasivaratri, all he's really doing is upchucking a stone phallus, what a joke. It's his big stunt of the year." Then we would remember the Jean Harlow effect on the swinging silver couch, the *Jhula*, adored by all the people at festivals. All things that smacked of some grandiose narcissism.

But under the weighty gravity that we could not be virtuous in ourselves, under the strain of that unmentionbale force that we were under, the fact was made even more clear that we could not perfect ourselves or be our own salvation from what people called, to use a common semantic label, sin. We cocld not hold the perfect demeanour of noble purity I felt we needed in order not to be invalidated. Indeed we rapidly toppled, and the Blake cabin became ever more dosolate. I was sinking into a deeper and deeper depression at times, barely able to walk from the hideous gravity. No not sinning rashly but simply so crestfallen that no one would consider me a reliable source of truth or a model worthy of respect. Still I resisted the big escape, for no other reason than I believed that there yet had to be another answer. That Truth as an absolute had not perished in this scandal. Otherwise, should it be an absurd universe designed by a cosmic clown, then truly I would be in downtown Bangalore drunk out of my mind trying to blow people's minds right, left, and center, shouting terrible railing obscenities the sky, and doing Lord knows what unholy things. Yes, I resisted the basest and most outward sins of grossness.

Surya Das, however, found reasons to experiment with some of his old ways of "centering" himself. And this is what I feared. Disintegration through a self-made lie. In the puja-room, next to the kitchen, I could hear him reciting a sing-songy mantra to Siva, a ganja-mantra for smoking hashish. Incense would be burning as Surya Das would make *mudric* gestures in the candle-light before all manner of deities on the shrine, perhaps to make the act sacred. After a few puffs he would emerge with a slightly sheepish grin, as though waiting for me to dump him. A trace of defiant satisfaction would remain underneath, yet not without that pitiful look of weakness so typical of self-indulgent alcoholics. He would make some airy statement about the centuries of tradition of naga sadhus in north India. My comment would be, "You've already wandered over your head in one maze, don't be a classic fool lest you wander beyond reach into another maze. This is not a child's play. You've already been conned once, you've been duped, sold a spiritual Brooklyn bridge. So walk very carefully, watch that humanist pride that tells you that you have some sort of innate impunity from deception. Because you know you don't. You're still staggering around from the last shocking deception. And if you are disillusioned with one whom you have been under for seven months, seeing him work miracles and all, why drum up any blind faith over some romantic tradition of ancients whom you have neither really known nor been with in depth. They too could be chasing the will-o' the-wisp into the void, into hell itself."

And then with some foreboding I recalled the dream in Srirangapatnam. That after having left Baba out of doubt, I would blow it. Yet I was dogged that I would not give the dream the dignity of being prophetic truth if the very hub of its message was grand illusion. No.

Just because I had believed in some false light did not repudiate or negate the existence of the true light. For counterfeits, whatever they be, they were parasitically dependent on the existence of genuine articles. Without the real they could not pass themselves off as the real things, be it counterfeit note or an impersonation of a great man. Perhaps the real victory of hell over me that awaited at the door of my soul was the possibility that after such a bitter aftertaste from this last experience I would give up on all truth, on all hopes of a true God-man. I would turn away prematurely when the very light of God's compassion awaited at the door, even now in the quiet voice of holy love, forbearing to reconcile me with all other lost men to Himself. And if this happened, one might see why an adversary to the true God might have such a lethal weapon in counterfeits, if for no other reason than to seal men shut in disillusionment, such that their minds would place the real God with the false gods, and in a sweeping gesture foreclose the matter. My real failing then might be a voluntary loss of hope, a self-pity, and failure to hunger and seek after good, after rightness, perhaps even forgetting love itself, and ultimately abandoning the original relentless quest for the truth.

If a self-revelation had come out of all this, it was the humbling fact that I could be deceived extensively. And in grim loneliness, constantly throughout the days, I would struggle with the question, "If I can be so totally blinded and deceived, then when can I ever really know the truth and not question whether it too is not another lie? Will I ever, after this, be able to tell the true man of God from the false?" I could not answer the question.

By 27 June, a week-and-a-half before the huge college opening festival in Ananthapur, Surya Das and I knew wes till had some scores to settle. For one thing, much of my luggage was at the main ashram in the rocket suite. *En route*, we would confront Wendel with the whole story. So too we would tell some of the Blake crew now back in Puttaparthi. But we would be very cautious, not even hinting at it to the others because if we were wrong, then we will have spread a deadly plague, and if we were right after all, we would be extremely vulnerable. Yes, even now our minds hesitated and still asked if it wasn't all some perfect foil to destroy the ego, circuitous love as it were. But such thoughts were more habit than anything else, a reflex are to recapture the dying light of hope. Even so, undernenth I knew it was all over. Something in me had been permanently broken and I could not in any event go back to Baba, even if he had conjured up Patrick. Why? Because I was not made of that strange substance required to walk the tight-rope. Not because it was too difficult but because it required shuffling the deck of truths and nontruths till you were so dizzy that the distinction vanished. And that alone, I knew, would wreck the fibre from which I was made.

We would look the Blake cabin and, like two refugees in flight, hasten with our terrible revelation into Bangalore. At the Regent snack-bar we would be most secretive, for therein were the elect friends of the "rooftop prophetess," Tatu. These were the companions of Mark, two of whom arrived at the same time as he did before the birthday festival; Margaret, Barbara, and Betty came with Jerry earlier. They were exuberant, dressed to the hilt, and gabbing away. Apparently they too were in on something together. Neither of us was interested. I wanted to eat and leave. But they jested, and their eyes flashed in our direction again and again, filled to the core with hidden nuances of understanding. Like a disagreeable older brother, I would lean on their table, masking my despair with that same armour of lonely control I used in Srirangapatnam, and in so many ways intimated, "Oh, yeah. Is that all?" in a kind of belch, and walked away. All they had let out was that Baba had psychically been preparing them for the drama of the age, tee-hee. They were so sure of this that they were staying in the fanciest hotel in town, buying silk saris, jewellery and otherwise preparing themselves for the great event.

With a guarded dignity, Surya Das and I would leave them to take the train to Ananthapur where Wendel was working on the mural at the almost completed college. The school would be stupendous, and we would find Wendel resembling Michelangelo standing atop a jerry-built platform working on one of his twenty-foot murals. More on them later. With a pang of brotherly love I would say, "You genius." He would smile back, and in my heart I would ask, "Why is it all for naught? This much talent and he's being squeezed for all he is worth. True beauty being grafted to an abomination." Immediately Wendel would catch something upon our faces and falter. Then he would hear something in the tone of my voice, "Wendel, we've got to talk. I wish we didn't, I'd give anything if we didn't, and instead our visit was all sunshine and roses. But at the expense of truth . . . . "

Up to the windy bleak four-storey rooftop we would go atop the huge circular monolith overlooking miles of barren wilderness. A structure which was more giant and bizzare than anything either Antonioni or Felini had incorporated in their grotesque surrealistic cinematic obsessions with architecture. Wendel, thinner than ever, moving about like Joe Cocker on stage and wearing these ragged white pajama bottoms, painstakingly drew patterns in the cement dust as he listened. It was getting to him. This was the first time I had ever seen anything get to him quite like this. I could see his faith beginning to stretch and falter, stress lines of doubt briefly surfacing on his face, then quickly forced back. My Lord, I thought, after five months of titanic effort out here in the wasteland, he has to hear this horror story. What a sense of loss, what a misappropriation of brilliance. Now the potent wave of thought we brought, threatened to extinguish this great effort. For Wendel would sense a most terrible compelling potency about the story. For a second he would review to us what happened to him with Baba. He was sure there was nothing erotic about it. No, of course not, it was purely purificatory. "But how do you explain what happened to Patrick? What if you had gone all the way?" He squirmed. Now it was just too unreal. And if it happened, well let truth win out in the end.

A sobering element in this for Wendel who wrote me a very encouraging letter about my own mission when I was writing alone in Srirangapatnam, was the very real fact that I was suddenly leaving. Maybe it would only be a brief tour around India and I would be back, but something was changing. Doubtless this reinforced his sense of loneliness inherent in the path. It may have also eroded some of the reinforcement of his faith from another angle. The validity he saw in me inevitably translated indirectly towards his faith in Baba, had to reinterpreted.

After a while he would be compelled to return to the mural, while we went into town several miles away to eat. Wendel would be working eighteen hours a day in the hot wind, as perpetual crowd of helpers and visitors stood around gaping in silence when he didn't direct them to either clear off or bring him some supply. When we finally left the central building that day (for the night before we had spent on the train), a limousine pulled up as its occupants gibbered away self-importantly in high-pitched irritation. Ratan Lall, the Bombay millionaire, made token gesture of greeting as he climbed out. Surya Das and I would take the afternoon bus to Puttaparthi, a slow and inefficient ride. Yet another horror, during the ride, would occur outside one of the villages along the way. Slowly the bus, on my side, would roll over one of the local mongrels, splitting it apart to yelp in agony for fifteen minutes beneath my window, entrails and spinal cord in view. The village leaders would try to extract recompense from the bus driver as this went on. By evening we would arrive in Puttaparthi unnoticed. For Baba would have headed to Ananthapur by another route, missing us by hours. This was exactly as I had hoped. Not that we would hedge around confronting Baba, as Wendel himself urged with a tone of detached bravery, that we should confront Baba, albeit even traumatically, hinting that the mountainousness of the issue was such that it would reach Baba via the high-priority red lines of consciousness.

On a hill-top that evening we would tell Ed and Phil the news who would receive this with mixed and cautious alarm, detecting within themelves that if I had been enervated for months, I was now on the move as never before, compelled in a very real way now by this changed situation. Ed especially would become disheartened, knowing that his choice would be to cut us off and remain with Baba or end up in the same hell of uncertainty. This sudden spanner in the works would end for them a perfect little story out here in India. It was a blemish. If I had been a faith-building example before, now the spiritual ticker tape turned the tide upon Eddie announcing that I might have fallen through the bottom of the market of credibility. Even Tal might become a part of Eddie's maya.

With Baba's unnerving presence out of the way, I would be given several last days to spend on the ashram alone, much of the time to reflect on the hills at the old well, and otherwise remind myself of the sudden abandonment of such a great part of me, a continuing shock not much less intense than that first fateful eve when I heard the news.

Some of us would huddle together in the foothills to decide what to do next. Eddie would just listen on, at times helping us grope for alternatives as though now a part of the schisming group. Other times Surya Das and I would be alone. Oddly enough I was not yet obliterated from the face of the earth but still very much alive and kicking. If Kasturi and I "walked down memory lane" together within the ashram, smiling and talking like old times by the shrines at the side gate, it took everything I had to keep him from knowing that the bottom had fallen out of my life. One, there was the possibility that I was under testing still. Two, there was that life-long caution that if I wasn't, he didn't need to hear the whole story now anyway, and that I didn't know what I was up against, and that if Baba were actually some form of demonic power, the less Kasturi, Baba's eyes and ears, knew the better for my livelihood. For I had felt for some time now that I was a fugitive, a hidden agent in the nest, a fallen chief disciple, and quite possibly in the long run the most internecine enemy of Baba if there were a God apart from him, which he opposed. For if Baba were a devil incarnate with his own ring of disciples, would it not be perfect justice for one of them to fall away and defect, counterbalancing Judas Iscariot, to expose his stratagems to the entire world, those millions of souls that this demon spirit wished to engulf.

In the late afternoon of my final day in Puttaparthi, 31 June, I chose to go off alone up the hillside overlooking the entire ashram, settling amongst the huge smooth boulders in the warm breeze, where the din of village and ashram sounds blended faintly. I brought my wrinkled New English Bible, retrieved from the belongings I had come to get. As scrambled as I was, I still dared yet to search for truth, this time in the scriptures. The cloud around me would be pierced by some dividing sword, sufficient to scatter it somewhat, but I was not yet ready to throw my allegiance upon what came forth.

Quietly I lay the book open on a large flat rock to peruse it while lying on my side where the panoramic view lay before me. Soon my concentration became rapt. For truly it spoke as no other book. There was no mistaking its spirit, and searching honesty was unlike any other book. Its stand on the way things were, was utterly exclusive, forceful, unbending, and total authority. Neither did it mince words nor speak in long drawn-out esotericisms.

When I turned to the twenty-fourth chapter of Matthew, a startling disclosure was made to me. The alarming thing, as it seemed to address my specific travail, was that it had contained this message all along, down these long centuries, even with my having read over it in the past, apparently missing its urgent warnings. The words were those of Christ himself warning his followers across time of what was to pass before he returned to the earth. It was in answer to a query from amongst his disciples regarding the exact time of the return.

"And as he was sitting on the Mount of Olives, the disciples came to Him privately, saying, 'Tell us, when these things will be, and what will be the sign of Your coming and of the end of the age?'

And Jesus answered and said to them, 'See to it that no one misleads you. For many will come in My name, saying, "I am the Christ," and will mislead many. And you will be hearing of wars and rumours of wars; see that you are not frightened, for those things must take place, but that is not yet the end. For nation will rise against nation, and kingdom against kingdom, and in various places there will be famines and earthquakes. But all these things are merely the beginning of birthpangs. Then they will deliver you up to tribulation, and will kill you, and you will be hated by all nations on account of My name. And at that time many will fall away and will betray one another and hate one another. And many false prophets will arise, and will mislead many. And because lawlessness is increased, most people's love will grow cold. But the one who endures to the end, it is he who shall be saved.

And this gospel of the kingdom shall be preached in the whole world for a witness to all the nations, and then the end shall come. Therefore when you see the *Abomination of Desolation* which was spoken of through Daniel the prophet, standing in the holy place, then let those who are in Judea flee to the mountains, let him who is on the housetop not go down to get the things out that are in his house; and let him, who is in the field, not turn back to get his cloak. But woe to those who are with child and to those who nurse babes in those days. But pray that your flight may not be in the winter, or on a *Sabbath* for then there will be a great tribulation, such as has not ocurred since the beginning of the world until now, nor ever shall. And unless those days had been cut short, no life would have been saved, but for the sake of the elect, those days shall be cut short.' "

And then on the next verse, after looking up from my Bible to take it all in, I felt a fiery conviction as I read, "Then if any one says to you, 'Behold, here is the Christ,' or 'There He is,' do not believe him. *For false Christs and false prophets will arise and will show great signs and wonders, so as to mislead, if possible even the elect.*"

"Behold, I have told you in advance. If therefore they say to you, 'Behold, he is in the wilderness, do not go forth, or, 'Behold, He is in the inner rooms, do not believe them.' "

"For just as the lightning comes from the east, and flashes even to the west, so shall the coming of the Son of Man be." (Matt. 24 : 3-27.)

There was so much in this passage that I had to close the book for a long time before I opened it again. In my caution, I would just file it away as evidence of an alternate explanation as to what Baba was, through a different lens, the lens of the Holy Bible. In the Bible's view he would be one among many miracle-working deceivers specifically foretold and allowed to come for some reason, perhaps as a part of God's judgement against those who had willfully turned away from the light of truth. But how that would be decided was mystery to me.

Then as red veins stretched across the sunset sky, another fact had begun to sink in on my mind, from this passage, that had never crossed my mind. That Christ would return like "lightning." I believed implicitly all these years that He would reincarnate, assuming that he was the same part of Brahma as I assumed we all were. But no such thing was even vaguely implied. Rather, the long-promised Messiah would enter the world by birth, but only upon one occasion, through direct supernatural intervention. The Old Testament had predicted this long before Christ, "Therefore, the Lord himself shall give you a sign; behold, the virgin shall conceive and bear a child, and shall call his name Emmanuel (God with us)." (Isaiah 7: 14). To an unprepared generation such a miracle could appear scandalous indeed. But God had warned of it in the prophets. The provision being that the only choice people would have was that either the Messiah was "God among us," or that most unholy of stigmas, a bastard. Difficult indeed for those who had systematized the laws of God.

So too, I would later learn of the Old Testament's prediction of his appearance in an obscure town, "But thou, Bethlehem, Ephratah, though thou be little among the thousands of Judah, yet out of thee shall He come forth unto Me that is to be ruler in Israel: Whose goings forth have been from of old, from everlasting." (Micah 5: 2). That too might be an obstacle to an unprepared generation, so obscure a place for his appearance. A most humble sign indeed. Yet all this would be the one and only birth of the Messiah. Never again would he come through the human vehicle of a mother. Never would the Divine purpose it so that the Messiah would need to repeat the covenant of again growing up from childhood. That sacrifice of a perfect man to atone for the fall of a once perfect man (and his seed) had been satisfied once and for all. This fact nullified the claims of every guru in India and in the world who claimed to be Christ come again. For there was and is not a guru alive whose family origin is not well known. They have all referred to their lineage. So too the world has not radically changed course under these gurus.

But when the ascended Son of God returns from deep heaven in power, in the very manner in which he departed, history as we know it, will stop forever. Perhaps it will be as sudden and as total as this Logos, through whom the warp and woof of the universe were made (as the Gospel of John declares), suddenly stopping every thing in creation in mid-sentence, in mid-electron orbit to, for a pause, celebrate the precise instant of the advent. Certainly every creature in the earth and beneath the earth will know simultaneously. "Every eye shall see." But that "Alpha and Omega," far from being a helpless infant born to yet again toddle and grow up, can only be that once crucified Nazarene appearing in blinding and exalted glory, even so that those who are not his shall tremble in deepest terror. And only then will every knee bow and every tongue confess Jesus as Lord, God the Son, of whom Isaiah is given the words, "And his name shall be called Pele (Wonderful), Yoetz (Counsellor), El Gibbor (The Mighty God), Avi Ad (The Everlasting Father), Sar Shalom (The Prince of Peace)." (Isaiah 6 : 1) (El Gibbor may be translated literally from the Hebrew as God-Man, whom Isaiah identifies with the prophecy, "Unto us a child is born, unto us a Son is Given.")

The long green and white prayer-hall looked too diminutive and gaudy to harbour the returning Christ of the Bible. I would close the Book having at least settled that forever. Later I would go out into the starlight, still very much broken and confused, to bring my despair before God, whoever and whatever He was. With some relief I would utter the Lord's prayer, at the end petitioning with heavy heart that I be shown by God Himself his true nature without the need to fear deception.

After two long years, almost, of frightful bondage to a god I was beginning to learn was not God, it was a most relieving thing to board the bus in the dark morning hours and rumble away through the wilderness shadows. Much weight upon my soul was yet to be resolved. I was not sure how yet, but an emboldened rage was slowly mounting within me about Baba, gathering in my soul, as armies before, battle, for the needed confrontation to get at the truth.

Slowly shrinking to my rear was a community of now distant spiritual relatives caught in the growing heat of an epidemic of infectious hepatitis. Strained to the limits these American and European brethren would wilt in the sun and answer their bodies' acute hunger for protein with overspiced starch, all the while thinking proudly to themselves, that this was causing them to become purer and purer by the day. The one sickly image to remain in my mind was a most pale-faced and puny Peter, the English photographer, who now resembled a dying and irritable grandmother in bed swarmed by a host of needling people carrying tea, food, snacks, and gossip. So too would be the fate of Jnani and many others, Baba's fruit on the desert, his languishing children.

25

On 3 July, Surya Das and I visited Mark at St. Philomenas hospital one last time. Soon he would be out and now he wasn't sure whether his health could withstand the ordeal of the Ananthapur festival or not. He was hurt that we were being secretive. I had warned Surya Das before that Mark might spill the beans just out of a need to blurt out the story to one of the girls. Mark's eyes brightened over the spreading rumour, that Hilda would arrive at the Bangalore airport in a few days.

Before leaving the hospital, I would return to the clinic, pressing my colon with my fingers, in order to detect movement and reduce the sharp pains. I would not return to hear the results of the tests.

Within a few days, Surya Das and I would begin clearing up the cabin, packing our belongins. The future remained pretty much a blank for Surya Das and me. All we knew was that if we had to move we were ready. The feeling of balancing on a high wire had by no means ended, nor had the crushing despair of the soul. We would continue to mask before the others bravely should we encounter them. Surya Das continued to anticipate the new challenge of a spiritual pilgrim age across India, from ashram to ashram, master to guru, so that his inner evolution would continue. I would tolerate what I would consider to be an inherent blindness in him with a note of disgust . . . . "Uh, yeah. Uh, neat. Maybe the next one will wear a green robe and have a flat-top and lots of moxie. Yogi forty-second-street-ananda with a pet anaconda called Grumba."

Our waiting for Hilda at the airport was little more than formality. It was 5 or 6 July, and the big festival was only days away. The minute the old gal got out of the plane, Surya Das and I would probably hit her with the whole thing. In the meantime, I was in anything but a receptive mood for hearing her predictable conciliatory pearls of wisdom in response to this recent scandalous test. Indeed I had never held her in awe or reverence as the others did, never having met her for one thing, and having my own personal barriers and suspicions about women gurus. It just wasn't my style. As far as telling her the story, we would try to feel how receptive she was on the spot; Surya Das, who knew her, trusted her. I didn't.

Yet it hardly need be mentioned that if there were some diabolical hierarchy of creatures perfectly in the know, in which she (a nomadic spinster who had spent thirty years in Asia under various power gurus) was a part, entrusting her with the information of what we now knew, might be the most naive thing we could do, similar to the old movie formula of informing the friendly confidante who happens to be the enemy's number one undercover agent. Doubtless she would sympathize with us, but it would be a stalling tastic as the news got to the commander.

Secrecy, again, I felt was the safest insurance in case there was more behind this whole thing than met the eye. Baba's powers themselves expelled the possibility that he was merely an innocent bystander, an ordinary deluded man. His metaphysics was too complex and knowing, his ability to manipulate people far too devastating. And besides, there were rumours of the fate of those who had turned against him, and they often suggested bloody macabre French thrillers. Let the reader remember the bloated body that the ashram police asked me to photograph on the sands of the Chitravati river near the main ashram around the last Mahasivaratri festival.

Yet my mood at the airport was mixed. There was the absurd dark-humour side to the whole episode that my mind wanted to conveniently use in order to flee from the incredible weightly vice that it had been squeezed in for these weeks, weeks of despondence, anguish, disgust, and bitterness. Absurd sardonic abandon might also lash out at Hilda, as she descended the ramp to view her illustrious reception party, two of Baba's former prime disciples. And my imagination went rampant with defiant mind-shockers to greet this sacharine wig-maker from Manhattan.

Fantasies . . . . Defiant blue-denim mockouts. Surya Das and I chewing tobacco. He has his lemur on his shoulder, a little being with saucer-shaped eyes that looks as if its from outer space. Our mouths hanging dumbly open as the old hag with the silver hair floats down the ramp. She walks up to the two big lugs, chewing tobacco, mouths still hanging open in mock obscene shock, when not chewing, eyebrows knit together in hostility.

"Sai Ram seekers, Oh dear, where is our master in this turbulent plane of existence . . . that dear sweet . . . ."

A long pause, double takes at the sky, obnoxious chewing movements, hand on hips still looking around. She's definitely uncool. "Uh . . . I dunno,' I look at the lemur, "Ya see where he went? He was here a minute ago . . . ." The animal looks positively weird "Aw yeah . . . dig it, some dude dressed up like Jiggoletto in chiffon, weird walks in the French court manner with the wig and ruffled silk . . . uh, I think he was walking by, let's say mincing by and chewin on a lemon, headed towards the men's room. Probably wanted to see if he could float a lemon in the sink. Seems to me that Baba took off right after him looking really excited about something. Followed him right in there, Lady . . . . See the men's room over there. Yeah, that's right. Ought'a be thru in a sec."

Surya Das twangs in. ' Yeah, fiddle, he's only wha,-cha-call anointin the old Siva lingam. Does it all the time. Yeah, yeah, he's groovy. Yeah, we've learned a lot. Here kid, show her how ya do shakti-pat." The lemur reaches out and yanks her nose.

Ten minutes later, Surya Das and I chewing away and looking at the ground. Hilda shrieks hysterically, "Oh, my, look at all those people jumping on him."

"How dya like that, he's thru. Oh, uh, don't sweat it lady. Does it all the time. That's just a what-cha-call degradation number. He's paid 'em to do it, so he's not really getting roughed up too much. Everything's under control. " The baggage clerk and a freelance troop of boy scouts continue throwing luggage on the avatar and sliding down the heap to the sound of uncontrolled titillation.

In my next vision, we are wearing Stetson hats, cowboy boots, leather jackets, and smoking hand-rolled weeds, looking really mean. Instantly my fantasy would die in disgust as I started thinking about the catalyst that had really sparked all this off in the first place. A book I had been reading in a wicker chair in front of the outdoor restaurant beside the runway. William Burroughs, *Nova Express*, a treatise on trans-galactic mobsterism, bleaping with paranoia and insights into the nature of the demonic and grand-scale con games. It had sickened my heart and soul. And I could not help but apply the tenor of the message to the entire Baba scandal, and the reality, to once again start up that perennial debate of the nature of supernatural evil as a force divorced from God. Burrough's disjointed heavy-powered phrases still ripped through my mind as I recalled that he had written it in Cairo, ankle-deep in morphine ampule boxes. The inspiration seemed to be demons blowing the whistle on one another's stratagems. Yet the setting was without hope, a Godless universe.

Soon an announcement over the P.A. would drive me to finish the book before the delayed plane arrived. I had bought it that morning at the large airport new-stand, hoping it would assuage the torment. But it only aggravated it.

On some agonizing line about the hell-world Minruad, I would look up from the book and see the silver needle circle overhead.

Fifteen minutes later the plane would unload, and each head that came out that wasn't Hilda's further confirmed our suspicions that it was just a rumour. Instead, like the messenger boy that gets the brunt of criticism for bringing the bad news, every face that wasn't the one received a sneer of disgust from within us. By the last passenger, my fantasy about the hostile reception party was beginning to look true of Surya Das and me, we were starting to really sneer. We didn't even notice that the plump girl coming down the ramp was wildly waving at us until Surya Das came and said, "It's Lila, she must have come in Hilda's stead. Looks like she finally got her visa."

And I look over, unable to mask my feelings, "Aw crap, she's not even pretty. You mean we've gotta go through this ordeal. Why it'll blow her mind . . . ." Now I started to consider the factual ramifications of our less than perfect zeal for her one and only what-cha-call it. "She'll see right away that we're ready to float a lemon on the dude." Truly it would take a superhuman effort of will to chaperone her to the Regent guest house and contain the inner hell we were going through. The last thing we needed was a bubbly turned on bhakta, especially an old standby like Lila about whom Michelle had spoken highly of for a year now and who was as close to Hilda as you could get. And that meant that she would be somewhat in awe of me. "Man am I gonna' be a comedown for her." And in truth when she got to us, I could feel her heart starting to break. India wasn't going perfectly, the dream wasn't as planned. Soon Herman's daughter from San Diego would join us and by the time we got to Regent, Lila would be in tears as I stood at the head of the table making the very cautious statement, "Again I would urge you not to overly adore the physical manifestation of Baba. For that particularized love, as painful as this sounds, will be edged over into the domain of the absolute. It will not endure to be shackled to a merely corporeal form." Behind my black eyes was an ocean of anguish. She'd break again, practically bawling. We would leave to reunite the next day with her, Herman's daughter, and one other girl to join them in a rented taxi, deciding if nothing else, to make our final ride to Baba one of physical comfort at least.

By early afternoon, 7 July, our dust-covered taxi went by the wire fence of the college compound to the gate. A policeman in a sentry-box signalled us through. "Well, there it is," I announced, not extactly trying to completely disguise my lack of enthusiasm. The three girls in the back completely missed it, hopping frantically up and down in their seats. For Herman's daughter, it would be a first time, for Lila, the first time in two-and-a half years.

What was yet to get through to the girls was that they were mere grains of sand in the avatar's world mission. What had once been personal intimacy with Baba, when fewer foreigners flocked Brindavan, had vanished, and in place, Baba's eyes would fall upon Lila with no more recognition than if she were a stranger in the crowd just arriving in from some meaningless American city. She would try to press up to him out of a restrained flock of the older western girls, with an insecure self-fueled joy on the landing of the second floor as Baba passed. Baba would hiss at the crowd to stand back not showing the least trace of recognition for Lila, whom he would order to restrain the others. She would then freeze as he walked on, buckling at the knees with tears in her eyes. Already Baba was beginning to stretch her and test her faith. Herman's daughter also would be crying, though probably for a different reason. The price of faith in this stubby frog king walking around chewing betel leaves as people in magnetic storms moved at his beck and call. Where was the love that her tender little soul was starving for?

The sight would pain me. But I knew that they were not at all ready to hear what I knew, still very much invested in earning Baba's grace. Anything from me would be taken as a threat upon their faith. Lila especially, famed in the Hilda group for her untiring devotion, would now assume that Baba's world mission had boomed so gigantically in her absence that it was only fitting that she was a mere flea. And she would have to adjust to this simple fact. Other westerners with more talent and spirituality had replaced her. And like an old faithful, her role would be to just hang on hoping for that rare nod from Baba, that piece of bread thrown at the dogs in the outer court. Dead would be her dream of returning glory. Doubtless this was in her tears.

In the grand entrance-hall, bordered by two gigantic murals, each by wide elegant stairs, Lila might look up to examine the paintings; two crystal reproductions in the Wyeth tradition, one of Puttaparthi with miles of mountains, rice paddies, bullocks, arid fields and the main ashram, the other of a verdant pristine forest in the wilds of north America, a bird hovering in frozen flight in the gap of a narrow canyon between two luscious banks, dew drops glistening on leaves, every twig, every leaf in miraculous focus, a sublime rainbow in the background. And up on a platform would be this very high spiritual being in white, not even aware of the shifting swarms of awed admirers, and almost casual about Baba's frequent stops to survey his work, invariably to chat with and encourage him. Most humbling for Lila.

It was late afternoon. Wendel would catch my eye and hop down from the platform immediately while onlookers puzzled like hungry groupies, pressing to get the inside word. Guards would perpetually keep Wendel's working area clear, standing back respectfully as I joined him in the clearing. "Like old times," I would tell myself ironically. Wendel would rest his hand on my shoulder saying in a confidential voice, "We've got to talk. Haven't got much time. This thing has to be done by the inauguration tomorrow. Probably I'll have to pull an all-nighter." The President of India would be arriving with a constellation of VIPs.

Wendel and I would trot up the guarded stairs towards the roof. Arm-banded volunteers in the Seva Dal would step aside.

On one landing we would pass Indra Devi coming down the hall. Her manner was cold until she recognized us and then waved with enthusiasm. She had just consoled Herman's daughter who had probably broken in on a fire-side style chat with some of the plump affluent Bombay ladies, doubtlessly fans of Indra Devi's books on domestic Hatha Yoga.

In the grey light on the roof, Wendel would question me if I had resolved anything with Baba. Not yet, I would answer, still having found no occasions to confront Baba. I would indicate my growing conviction that it would, at this point, take a supreme miracle for Baba to convince me that he was who he claimed to be. And even to say that he was a Godly foil acting in the context of driving me away from all relative phenomena would be really stretching it, more of an expedient con. Though such an explanation might become my escape route to dampen the others. Not Wendel would share a great confidence with me, perhaps in doing so, hunting for clues like me and exposing his doubts. Yet quickly he would shrink back to foreclose the matter.

"You know a few hours after you and Surya Das left, Baba arrived and the first thing he did was come up to me and bring me into his quarters down there." Wendel was bothered, his tone conveying bewilderment over the cloak and dagger mysteries in the walk under Baba when things could so easily be up-front. Perhaps Baba had let his guard down with Wendel. And for that reason Wendel would have to answer with richer faith as fully deserving of the confidence that his master bestowed upon him.

In the privacy of his suite, Baba would look into Wendel's eyes questioningly. "What is wrong? Have you seen Tal? What does he say? Doubts? Bad faith?" Baba would even sound hurt and jealous. At that point Wendel would have told Baba nothing about his knowledge of the terrible incident, and our mission to him evidently quite stunned by Baba's question. No human being could have told Baba a thing. Yet Wendel would have to ask himself why Baba need question him. Wendel, attempting perhaps to protect me, would give Baba a vague answer. That Tal was going through something, some kind of test of doubt but he would come through.

Then out of the blue, Baba would mention a certain person, a rather pretty lad from Whitefield whom Wendel had perhaps seen few times and knew of through Surya Das and me. His words would come in rapid, urgent, and even panicky whispers, informing and warning Wendel. It would be a little hard for Wendel as sequences jumped around like a fragmented dream. "Some two years ago, one coming, a Whitefield hippie. Long hair muscles, American shirt saying 'love'. Not love, lust. Only interest is girls, not God. Sitting in darshan line, pretending to be an American. Swami knows." The rest would be garbled until the teenager, Patrick, would be accused by Baba of spreading damaging rumours. "False lies. Blind jealous reaction after I tell him to go. Now others believing lies. His word over swami's!" Perhaps Baba would hug wendel as a reminder of the purity of his love, and then Wendel would be dismissed to paint.

I would be chilled as well as infuriated into a more steely-minded resolve to combat Baba, now that he had broken, supernaturally, into my protective camouflage, smelling out through some kind of spiritual surveillance system that the "gasoline crack in history" of his blunders was growing wider and had leaked out, as more evidence was beginning to collect like beads of oil on water. Exactly what he knew and exactly what he would do about it was another thing. One thing was for sure, as I would point out to Wendel, he had already partially blown his defense by giving Patrick's story enough dignity to talk about it, in a tone far from detached, even defensive as though in fear of being found out. To me it further implicated Baba, as Surya Das would agree. But I could see the beginning of a widening gulf between Wendel and ourselves. I wondered if he had not already made his choice in his heart to go ahead and override the impediment to his faith. The scandal would be maya. Wendel would take the leap without cerebrating. I had leapt too many times already.

People would begin to turn in at around nine. Women's dorms and men's dorms of the elect in giant classrooms now carpeted with sleeping bags and mats. Late night chatter would be relegated to verandahs, the circuler overlook into the center compound on each floor, the rooftop and the acres of open compound between the various school building. In our room, there would be fifty or sixty men; most of the western males, a contingent from Ceylon, a few Bombayites, dental students and assorted proud officianodos. The heat was stifling, the mosquitoes unbearable. For me it would be like hearing the same tune all over again. Six a.m. reveille would be the same thing; bhaktis outdoing each other, in zest, zeal, and energy. People whistling loudly while shaving, doing calisthenics, looking self-important, slapping their chests like a German trailer park of hardcore campers. Others would look bored and knowing as they wiped the sleep out of their eyes, feeling no "rajasic" compulsion to prove themselves. Wendel would be on the eleventh plane of consciousness, oblivious to the frenetic insect movements around him, just a Neil Young sneer at all the obvious games and come-ons. As he would smile at me, for a second it would be like old times, but something had already started to change forever, and the twinge of sentimentality would almost be a part of the past.

It would be a big day, 8 July, the day of the festival, Guru Purnima, no less the period of the full moon. Thousands upon thousands would come to see the massive opening of the multi-million-rupee complex as little side-shows would be going on right, left, and center. The kings and queens of this state and that, coming to see Baba, demanding special audience. They would have to wait in a long waiting line. Baba might even be chastising them. Once great diadems of devotion, such as the overly loquacious Dr. Gokkak, would now have to walk a little more carefully. Indra Devi, in all of this, would hardly be noticed. Perhaps that was why she too would feel the need to march around as though a part of some great secret mission. Peripheral curiosity-seekers would look up. Baba would hardly give her a glance.

Early that morning I resolved in my heart that I would break through to Baba. My time was running out as the crowd grew by the hour before the afternoon's inauguration ceremony, now five hours away. Mounting within me was that inner fire that stops at no barrier, this time to settle something once and for all, though I was not sure how yet.

By this time I had felt a new reaction to Baba growing in my heart. I had noticed it the night before, the night when I saw him for the first time in a month-and-half as he passed me on the staircase leading to his suite, ushers in the distance, others looking on. They may have assumed that I was the old Tal Brooke, but now I was an alien in the nest. Baba would float right by me, neither looking at me nor acknowledging my presence. Yet I would sense that in his manner underlay a controlled caution. None of the outsiders knew the sort of duel or battle going on. By old standards it looked tame. Yet within my heart as he brushed by I felt nausea, revulsion, a deep indignation of the spirit. As though the spirit that inhabited the bright robed body was so putrid, so foul, so horrifying that if the crowd of disciples could for a second see it denuded, they would wail in horror, they would scream and run in terror. And then this tame-looking magnetic being, going in and out of their force fields like a magnet squeezing patterns between iron filings would, with all his disguise of beauty and grace removed and nothing left but exposed abomination, change character in a trice and pursue the screaming people like some giant man-sized scorpion with blazing red eyes and a thousand stinging tails. Indeed, when Baba brushed by me, I shuddered in my soul and wondered if a deeper eye of conscience in me did not detect a presence in dwelling the body of which the closest earthly parallel was a scorpion.

Now the appointed hour of deep contact was drawing close. My body and mind were hardly my own. The energy, intensity, and desperate urgency from so much at stake made me an inevitable pawn of the moment; expendable, explosive. I was determined in a mixture of despair and rage, that no tactic of Baba's would turn me back, no matter how enormous the price, even considering that whatever I did would be the first time ever in the history of foreign disciples under Baba. My revulsion of him was no so great that I knew that "plan B" was out of the question.

What was "plan B"? To go through the deep indignation of the soul of remaining in the nest as a camouflaged enemy, falling back into grace through perfect obedience. Using flattery to blind Baba. Seeming to be the even stronger disciple, repentant of my brief apostasy. Only he and a few would know (I was satisfied that Baba did not have full access to anybody's thoughts. He had a patched access, the rest he bluffed) of the Patrick episode. On some festival speech, as I would dedicate my book to Baba, in one horrifying public gesture. I would grab the bottom of his robe, and tear it off his entire body. It would probably lead to my death, even immediately. But what it would reveal would be either two neuter genitals, or the naked fact that this self-proclaming God come in flesh had been utterly deceived about his closest American disciple. His omniscience, telepathy, control of history, would be revealed as lies. There would be no conceivable good that he could use coming from such a humiliation. Even more, all of a sudden, before ten thousand shocked-onlookers, it might jar the web of energized control surrounding this spirit, to let out, before it could be held in check, its ferocious native evil, the scorpion nature as I perceived it, perhaps going berserk in demonic blasphemies and rage in the heat of blind passion, now oblivious to the pinheads looking on. As I have said, my indignation and revulsion of soul for Baba were so great that plan B was out of the question. For now I might just have to think of something that would settle the matter for myself, even if no one else understood, even if the matter rested as a silent understanding between me and the spirit in the bright red robe.

By ten that morning, the entire college complex would be teaming with activities; Barnum and Bailey sized awnings and tents being pitched, a styro-foam and plywood stage in the front, the school bands practising, acres of ground being roped off into sections, streamers and flags going up, loudspeakers being put everywhere, etc. The cafeteria building would be improvised out of one of the nearly completed school building, lines a block long, huge post of food, for the more privileged devotees at that.

But the main activities of the morning would take place in the large central three-or-four-storey circular building with the impressively sized circular park or courtyard inside. The four entrance ways into the building, in some ways suggestive of the Coliseum in Rome, would be packed. The main entrance, twenty feet wide with stately approach stairs, would be guarded by five to ten guards and Seva Dal members who would only reluctantly slide open the giant mesh gates to let through VIPs and members of the inner circle from the surging mass. Leaving the building for us was always an ordeal not worth the effort, except to satisfy hunger. By lunch, a chain of volunteers would cut open a walkway from the central gate to the cafeteria, staving back the ocean of bodies.

Raja Reddy would emerge from a limousine like Rudolph Valentino in white, and briskly approach Baba in the inner courtyard, at first bowing down to touch his forehead of Baba's feet.

Then there would be a token feeding of the poor as a few hundred wretched and maimed, a meagre fraction of those in the ocean of bodies outside, would be counted and squeezed through the mesh gates by several guards who would then direct the pitiful stream towards the circular park. They would sit in neat reverent rows within the monolith of the elect, the privileged caste of India looked on in a spirit of noble generosity. Baba would dutifully ladle out rice, dal, and sambar on banana leaves lined up along the sandy ground. When the peasants were finished, with an almost bored wave of the hand, Baba would motion that it was time for them to leave, turning a deaf ear to their quiet pleas and raised hands as they hobbled back out of the gate. Most likely they would all be [shooed away entirely from off the college grounds before the president's motorcade arrived by early afternoon some hours away.

The unreadable expression on my features would belie the ferocity of emotions within me. Now Baba was on a routine inspection of the rooms and office as a small train of attendants and dignitaries followed him ten feet behind. People appeared more awed and afraid of him than usual. The western girls, except for Michelle and Marsha, were a hundred feet away from the front area. Most of the males were scattered about. Many devotees filled the courtyard, standing frozen. Others assembled at different points of the circular ground floor verandah, while still others would look down quietly from above from the outdoor circular halls on one floor or another.

Wendel stood part way up the wide marble staircase on the right-hand side beside his mural of Puttaparthi. On the mezzanine above and behind him was the polished black door to Baba's suite, carpeted and elegant within and looking out to the entire front compound from a wide balcony; it was most suggestive of the Papal apartments from where the Pontiff emerged seasonally to bless the Vatican square.

I was planted near a wide pillar where the circular ground level verandah crossed the front lobby. Briskly Baba led a train of people towards me, heading for one of the main reception-room on the other side of the front lobby.

Calculatingly yet unobtrusively, at least in my case, I stood fairly far out, counting on the fact that Baba rarely veered course, his propensity being to sweep up the closer disciples. To onlookers this graceful act might be undetectable, giving his disciples a special sense of privileged intimacy. I was gambling. Indeed it would be hard to describe my mental state, perhaps bordering on madness. For I felt like the high echelon assassin on a mission of doom, now hidden in the ranks, yet quietly on the very edges of oblivion, seconds away from some terminal act that would result in overwhelming deathly retribution. What made the risk an even greater mystery was the fact that I realized that I would not know exactly what I was to do until the last moment, and there would be no turning back. Then there would be two possible outcomes, one perhaps making it an almost virtual suicide mission. No, I would not be slain on the spot. Other things would unwind by the powers that be, through time, to destroy me.

Several of Baba's closer new Indian disciples, being brave, edged up slightly behind me.

In seconds the bushy red figure with a radiant face and burning eyes was upon us quickly brushing by with great command. As his robe swept by my hand, hanging harmlessly to my side, all of a sudden it jolted with life, becoming tense and strong. My hand grasped a sizeable fold of the robe, waist level on Baba, held it as he continued walking on till the tension caught him, then I yanked it back. It happened so fast and my own movements were so disguised that the alarmed onlookers had not figured out yet what had happened.

Baba went three steps beyond me to fully realize what had happened, then he whirled around rapidly in a state of fury, spewing out words. He had pinpoined who it was. His black eyes boiled as he tried to contain the curses levelled at him. This was the predictable highly fissionable scorpion nature, the dreaded source of power, usually held in check. With an unexpected boldness and calm, again ready to pay the price, I looked right down his black orbs with a total conviction of knowledge regarding who he really was. I saw a despicable blotch, a mere cinder compared to the true God.

Suddenly he really reminded me of a diminutive aunt Jemima, a wrangling bitch, who had lost all authority over me and now had to bluff. "Rowdie, complete spoil. Go, get out here . . . ." I had seen this sort of thing crush people, denunciations far milder. Perhaps he thought it would crush me but I began to smile inwardly.

A voice was trying to tell my soul that it had just forfeited some undreamt of chance, falling into meaningless chaos. Yet already there was a golden trumpet of triumph blaring heavenward. Still I looked Baba in the eye and nothing earthshaking happened, I had not perished. My cool response would persuade the onlookers that this was merely a rather esoteric test between Baba and a high disciple, thus rendering his authority even more impotent, for I knew he wanted a train of ushers to pitch me out. He wanted to break me so that I crawled out. But they would look on in a bewildered silence unable to detect what Baba knew. That a bold aloof contempt in me was not exactly that lever point of reverence that Baba had gambled on wielding to break me with. Indeed the greatest insult of all, I held my dignity, and looked at this impostor with an implacable conviction that he had been found out, that his authority over me was gone, and that what resided within the shell was neither divine nor entirely human.

I would look at Baba a moment longer as he sputtered, then fade him out, turning suddenly towards a large gateway above where the clear blue sky shone through. The creature would get his last jabs in. But Tal would be looking off as feeling of hope for the first time in an eternity of anguish, would break in upon his soul like a heavenly choral works or the sudden joy of a Purcell brass triumphal. And what splendour did that vast blue firmament hold when compared to the shadows of this colosseum. The still quiet voice of the Comforter had appeared. A sovereign hand and a restraining power seemed to gently cloak me from venomous crossfire. I got the feeling that an ancient battle was going on about me that I was only dimly aware of, a great controversy between the creature in red and an unnamable infinitely vaster might.

Then I would sense a towering presence of almost limitless spiritual power standing before me. I am not being metaphorical. I am being quite literal. All I could think of was that mighty Biblical messenger of God, the archangel, forever present in invisible humility at what seemed crisis points in the world by God's perspective, when the glory of the very Creator demanded to be honoured, not only before men, but among the heavenly hosts and powers of the air. The closest image I would summon to comprehend this towering presence, the noble warrior of the light, was the Eldila of Perelandra and Malacandra, described in the trilogy of C.S. Lewis. And it had appeared for reasons that were far beyond my comprehension, dealing with a warfare that had spanned since before the foundations of the world, as a sign of judgement to this adversary in the red robe and as a banner of coming salvation to me, just when certain defeat had seemed imminent; it would be the sudden overthrow of Mordar, the victory of Calvary, the angel putting the Roman guard asleep and freeing the apostle Peter in the final hour of need. This I did not articulate. It happened too fast. All I knew is that somehow I had been rescued in the face of overwhelming odds. The beast would be held at bay, even like Daniel in the lion's den.

Impotently Baba would spin around and march off in a huff. I would still be looking up at the sky. A few onlookers would come to the area curiously studying me. Then Wendal would hasten over to question me about the incident. Beaming radiantly I would be hard put to explain my great sense of release unshackling, and freedom. Some of the other westerners would overhear my comments and see me smiling in relieved joy. But soon I would be removed from amongst them.

By the afternoon's festival I would use the remaining hours to study the enemy in red. He knew that I knew, but nobody else did. The band would be playing, the limousiness arriving, the great arena bubbling with tons of thousands, while hundreds of ministers of state, governors, politicians from Delhi, and men from all walks of renown, filled the reserved seating under an awning beside the stage.

Baba would finally lead a dramatic procession to the stage amongst the wailing of karnatic horns and band tunes. An honour guard would follow. I would be walking over the front ropes to head past the men's bhajan area with a line of empty microphones. Quietly Baba would hiss at me. "Pahh. Stay away from singing. Go out." I would ignore it, knowing that for now I could still exhibit the special freedom of an inner ring disciple that a large chunk of assembly would still assure that I had.

Holding my revulsion to Surya Das and myself, I would watch the event in the burning sun deep within the hidden recesses of the crowd under the main awning. Baba's eyes would occasionally pierce me out. A procession of notables would speak before the lumbering pedantic address by the President of India, Baba's most impressive pawn who would become his own fool, not even needing to be mimicked or ridiculed by Baba. Baba would roll back his head and laugh again and again. This putrid spectacle would appear several weeks later in India's largest national magazine.

The tedious event stretched for hours. I pitied anyone sitting in the direct sun rays all this time. Then towards the end a noteworthy thing happened. Thousands of angry local citizens of the region started to riot, pressing through the outer fence and into the huge mass under the main awning. The crowd started to ripple. Then it began to look as though things might go out of control, something that according to Baba, was impossible in his "august" presence. Apparently the president's arrival had not persuaded the mob in Baba's favour, this rumour worn and incident-filled stock that for two decades might have learned something about Baba to goad them into this. It seemed to suggest local scandals and unsettled scores, feuds, and grievances. For they yelled and chanted against Baba. Police with long sticks broke into the area slowly staving back the threat. But the blotch was already there. Things were by no means going smoothy for this self-proclaimed God of the universe.

Nor had things gone according to plan for the friends of Tatu, who by now, after hours of baking in the 110° rays, looked as though they were near heatstroke. They weren't even trying to smile or put on a good show now. True their arrival had been most theatrical. In a cab driven to the very border of the crowd, the three elect girls disembarking like Bombay film stars or Maharanis of Jaipur, waved at everybody and spread a gaint blanket in the front row of the privileged women's area. They had looked on knowingly for hours, slowly wilting, but determined not to show it. Their heads must still be held high in even greater expectation and faith. By the end of the entire gaudy event, when their silk saris were drenched and their make-up was running, they didn't even try to smile. That is until Baba walked by, and they would perk up for the last hope of a final sign. What would issue forth would be a vindictive rasping tone, chiding and demanding them through some well thought-out insult.

Soon the crowds would scatter in the crimson late afternoon light, and I would stroll up to the three dumbfounded girls still gaping and standing in shock by the side of the stage. Near tears, they would blurt out to me that they had been "taken." Margaret would laugh bitterly, perhaps in self-deprecation, stunned, disillusioned, now rambling her way out of a slowly ending trance about some kind of deep level hoax. And somehow Baba had known about it and taken pleasure in the sheer game of it; they had expected Baba to reveal a great mystery, his wedding plans with Tatu. I would laugh back pitifully with them agreeing that they weren't even near the ballpark. They would not fully see the irony as I could see it. Yet still being cautious with them, I would intimate my plans to move on with Surya Das for a tour.

Later that night would be my chance to say a cautious final goodbye to a number of really close people. India would be visibly heartbroken, this dear girl. She would note in the deep remorse of my tone that I knew something that I could not yet share. I seemed more a fugitive on the run than the robust disciple she had known, stating little more to her than that I was being pressed to go "beyond form." Cautiously I would warn her not to put her heart in the hands of Baba, the Baba that she understood him to be. I wanted her merely to accept the possibility of one day no longer having to be dependent upon Baba. It frightened her. She could not imagine how she would get along in the world without him. She would weep as affectionately grabbed her shoulder and left, heading out of the compound towards the ramshackle commercial stalls and jerry built stands. I wanted to down my intoxicating despair, back to haunt me yet again, in the public pandemonium, coke stalls, and floating circus atmosphere; because that was beginning to be hard answer about my two wasted years. I had been duped in a floating carnival. And now I could examine my due reward-dogs, beggars, mud, fruit-vendors, fleas, and photographers and every manner of hawker and hustler and con artist, all more fleas when compared to the really big con artist in the gaint colosseum. My due was a broken heart, a nearly wrecked soul, a penniless pocket, and a grossly undernourished physical body. Yet I had been spared my life. I wasn't sure that the others would all get away so lightly.

As I vacantly sipped a coke I would look out to the glowing lights of the festival. Searchlights lit up the gaint central building as it burned up into the night sky like a gaint monolith of Satan. A huge Walt Disney playland clock, ten to fifteen feet in diameter, stood directly above Baba's apartment on a raised tower, its luminescent dial numerals, and hands glowing in bright multi-coloured plastic. Figures walked on the rooftop high up, encircling the doughnut shape. Desolation, I would tell myself, the scene resembling a Boshian inferno.

Soon Phil's wife Prema, the black hip girl, would sidle up to me like Tina Turner ready to lay down a Mo Town heavy, swaying just slightly. I would prime the pump. "Well, was it impressive?"

"Honey, it ain't impressive, it's depressive."

"You said it. The whole thing was a horror show." I would then get to share her growing doubts, nothing her grievances and agreeing. This was the night that Jeanne, the girl who had come in our cab, would disappear.

Later I would hasten warily back to the men's dorm room, dodging the nocturnal shufflings of the enemy in red.

Early next morning, as more pandemonium would start up, I would quietly nod for Surya Das to unobtrusively head out a side gate of the doughnut-shaped monolith. I would carefully resist my urge to run once beyond the gate, my bags close to my body. Neither of us could endure the place a moment longer. Painstakingly I would determine to evade the searching black eyes of Baba, almost thrilled at the challenge of keeping his knowledge of my whereabouts in the dark. In an hour, we would be on an early morning train back to Bangalore.

I would decide to join Surya Das in the men's dorm at the Regent Guest House. Mark would have questions. I would be absolutely silent. And so I would remain till the three ex-friends of Tatu would arrive the next day in a cab.

And little did I realize that what was going to happen would pale anything that had ever happened to me in my life.

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All it took was a look into each other's eyes for us to know that the spell, the enchantment under Baba, was gone forever. It could never be resuscitated. This was the reckoning we faced. Who was he really? What was the answer? Where do we shunt our wrecked lives from here, at least for those of us who had wholeheartedly invested mind, body, and soul into Baba? This conference had to be more than just licking one another's wounds in a crisis.

In the usual role of a leader, I began to share with them why Surya Das and I had left Baba, Surya Das often picking up where I left off. This amazed them, yet they had each had their own inklings about this, that there was an unwholesome sensuality beneath Baba's holy veneer.

Yet how did this revelation about Baba fit into the cosmology of Vedanta? How about all those millions of complex pieces of the mystical puzzle, man becoming God, the system of reincarnation, finding the God-realized guru? My heart, mind, soul, and body shook within from the sepsis of this lie. For it was a lie. From the original genesis lie, across the centuries, it filtered down from civilization to civilization, as this adversary genius selected one human vehicle after another to carry it, this "higher enlightening," this "transcendent" elite truth.

As proverbs said, it was as sweet as honey in the first taste but underneath it was bitter, as wormwood. This was the mystery religion of Babylon, mystery Babylon, as revelation called it, the spiritual harlot whom God opposed from the foundations of the world and who opposed the true God from time's beginning. She, this subtle mystical body, had shimmered across, like Kali, into Egypt's mystery cults, to the Vedantist Brahmins, into the Neo-Platonic and Eleusinian cults of Greece, to the Druids, the Sufis, Mayans, and Cabalist Jews, criss-crossing a hundred cultures throughout time, with this enchanting Deruish, this dance of death. But this mystery dance was not allowed in the Bible. The scribes of Judah had to wash their hands of her, and across the centuries, Israel, God's chosen, was again and again purged of her. Repeatedly did the sons of Israel have to confess their sins of idolatry with mystery Babylon whenever they came in contact with her. Repeatedly did Jehovah God cut off those seduced into fornicating with her, should they not repeat.

The great mystery religions were at enmity with the Living God, for their father was the father of lies who was even now devouring souls, degrading the image of God, the race of mankind whom he hated. And in gnarling and twisting this apple of God's eye, Satan was engaged in the most internecine warfare against God conceivable.

Those of us sitting in a circle were part of this damaged property, maimed war victims trembling in a locked little room. Yet we never would have known it had we just sat back in America, armchair philosophers, passive armchair mystics, sipping intriguing concepts like fine wine but never taking the risk, never entering the heat of the battle, never putting our very souls on the line. But nearly everybody back home, the sunshine astrologers and weekend meditators were in exactly this predicament. They put their toes into the water just enough to be titillated but they never took the quantum leap. They would therefore never believe those of us who had taken the leap. We would be scoffed at as aborted pioneers who somehow didn't have it. Yet they possessed that magical infallibility of intuition to know. The Bible called this blind pride.

A story I had once read paralleled our situation, of fugitive running from a spell. Thomas Mann's, "Mario and the Magician," about a magician of such amazing power that he could totally captivate every will in an audience. Those who escaped could only do it by an utter and thorough breach with him, a gut-level revulsion that held on to nothing of the prior influence. I explained this to the others. "Remember, if we can't gives our lives to him now, then we cannot speak kindly of Baba from a distance or we will float back into his realm like straying astroids into a sun. There can be no compromise."

They asked me who I thought Baba was. Quavering, I recited something I had read on the hill overlooking Puttaparthi, Matthew 24:24. " 'And there shall come anti-Christs, false Christs, and they shall work great signs and wonders, so as to deceive . . . . Deceive . . . if it were possible, even God's very elect.' It's been in the Bible all along. That is what Baba is, an anti-Christ who works miracles. "

The verse completely caught them off guard as it did me.

"Then who is the real Christ?" the predominantly Jewish remnant asked.

"Christ." My answer had come so fast and the room became so still that I wondered whether it was entirely my own. "So simple, so incredibly simple " I amended.

It was not so much that I was guiding the course of the inquiry, this desperate search for an answer, as I was beginning to walk by faith into a greater light as confession removed the scales from my eyes. We had been deceived. We were wrong. Our understanding fell short of the mark. If you will, we had sinned. Now, for the first time in my life, I was beginning to see things in an entirely new light, putting me in the core of a miracle that nothing could stop but perhaps my own choice to turn away from the light (Let Wesley and Whitefield debate this in heaven, we on earth, I am convinced, see through a glass darkly regarding this great mystery).

Soon I would be transported from one kingdom to another, from one eternal destiny to another, from one state of existence to another, not by my own merit but by an act of unfathomable grace. It would happen in less than a second, and I would gain a certainty that would be unshakable, myself entering that Narrow Way told of in the gospels. At one time the most obviovs answer in the world, when you think about it, and at the other, perhaps the most difficult gateway to enter, requiring a form of humbling that no other path in the world genuinely requires. For no other path requires you, the sinner, to face up to the fact that you are a sinner. For no other path defines it as the Bible does, as the very words of Christ do, and herein is a difference as wide as the universe itself. You and the Living God agree about your blackened condition, your wretched and pitiable unredeemed state. That as you feel God's Holy eye upon you, you are a speck, most powerless, most small, yet even then, He loves you. And this is when I began to slowly weep.

It was dawning upon me in full power. I was not God. I was not even a god. I was Tal Brooke, a bleary-eyed creature lost in the spiritual night. Yes, I told the others. "This is all the Bible has ever said we are. Creatures made by God. Little mortal men, vulnerable little flesh and blood people, made from the common elements and God-breathed with a soul, life."

Sniffling slightly, I told the rapt listeners about something that happened to me in London the day before I came to India.

I was walking down Brompton Road alone, past Harrods, and quietly wept underneath. I was approaching my neighbourhood of childhood days. As then, twelve years ago, I was still alone, still seeking. The full orbit back was now as a young man, a thousand levels of experience later, having been stretched by recent personal anguish.

I entered a pancake house, got halfway through my platter, and back came the surging silent tears. I could not eat any more. So I arose and walked out, handing my money to the cashier. A most complex, almost nostalgic, forlornness was upon me. Down Brompton Road I went, going right at Cottage Place, where stood my old childhood home, a four-storey affair owned by some Earl. Up to the tree-lined drive I went, past the gaint grey Brompton Oratory to the more humble rear church, Holy Trinity Brompton, whose rear park had been a childhood playground for me. I was heading for that very same sanctuary where I used to blind people on Sunday mornings with a giant mirror from my roof.

Now I entered the old sanctuary alone, this rear English chapel. In the main chapel an organ rehearsal quietly filled the air with the gentle power of J.S. Bach. At the altar, I fell on my face, and started sobbing, praying God beseechingly never to let me go, never to forget me, or allow me to be ensnared, to bless me with his love, to have pity on me, to take the reigns of my life and guarantee me this search for the ultimate truth, that I attain the real answer no matter what it is.

The deep core of feeling was from my very spirit itself. Then I saw those immortal words carved into the marble altar, "Greater Love Hath No Man Than He Who Would Give His Life for His Friend." The weeping came again. When I left I fell against the wall sobbing by the door. Then I finally left a still small voice of assurance reaching down within me, saying, "You are about to go through a dark night, a great storm, and it will appear to you as though you will even perish, but my hand is on you, and I will provide you a way out. You will be saved in the end. You will come to know the truth in the end." A seal was made, I could now go to India without that nagging doubt. But the truth to be found in India was not Mystery Babylon after all, not mysticism, not yoga, nor any far eastern truth. It took this grand cycle to bring me full swing to the Christ of the Bible, the one and only God-man in the history of the world.

Perhaps this was the only exhaustive proof I would ever be satisfied with, I told the others. To finally concede that Christ is the only way, without need for any man, guru, or celestical being. For He is mighty enough to touch any heart, anywhere, anytime, alone or in a crowd, if we will only kneel and go through the narrow gate. It is the most honest and simple salvation imaginable, perfect, and available to any who would come. "Don't you see, it has to be that open, that honest, that straight, for any man. Not a few chosen initiates who carve their own gateway. And if I have crossed it in my life before—for isn't it interesting that in my soul I have always known about God—then you can bet that for at least one occasion, all other men, in their own way, cross by the same gate. Yes, even if they are Indian peasants, if they acknowledge the true God of righteousness, truth and holiness, in their hearts, seeing His handprint in the sun, stars, and within their very conscience, don't you suppose that he is omnipotent enough to bring them the gospel somehow? And if they had never heard it, all we need remember is that he is entirely just, that he will weigh each man by the light that was within him."

The salvation of Christ was a far greater and deeper thing, a riddle vast enough in its holy perfection, in its boundless design, to dwarf Baba's counterfeit tug-boat through the ocean of *samsara*, this vain effete peacock, this dark demon god of south India. What a gaudy, papier-mache gambling town imitation.

Some people tell me that when they were saved or born again, nothing dramatic happened. But when I was transported from the very throne of Satan, the center of a spiritual Mordor, to the heavenlies of the co-eternal Christ, it really was as lightning in its soul shaking power and immediacy. Fully an experience to pale anything that Baba had ever vainly tried to counterfeit. In an instant I went from Tal Brooke, dead in his sins, to Tal Booke, forever redeemed, crossing that gulf of separation from God that all creatures in this fallen world experience, to communion and full acceptance with God for the first time ever. Such that the seal of the Holy Spirit, given me at this salvation, even now cried out "Abba," Father, to the Lord God Himself, as a new-born infant.

In front of the others in the room, I was on trembling knees tearfully praying for myself and for any who would bow their heads with me. I utterly denounced Baba. I utterly admitted the depth of my wrong-doing and sin. Then I confessed that Christ alone is the way, the truth, and the life. And that His name is the only name under heaven and earth given among men by which we may be saved. I confessed Jesus Christ as Lord and Saviour, and asked Him to enter my heart, to take over the reigns of my life, forever, forever, and forever without end, Amen.

I had this most joyous certainty that somewhere on the other end of a long-time connection, there had been a scream as the tentacles of some spiritual enemy, those deep inroads of the empire of Satan on my soul, were torn away and cast off by God Himself. Perhaps in some dark chamber, the Baba spirit wailed in rage. It had probably never suffered a defection quite like this. Let us relive this moment of triumph in a great epic of Tolkein, who is unparalleled with words.

". . .At the heart of the realm of Sauron and the forges of his ancient might . . . all other powers were here subdued . . . .The light sprang up again, and there on the brink of the chasm at the very crack of Doom, stood Frodo, black against the glare, tense, erect, but still as if he had been turned to stone . . . . And far away, as Frodo put on the ring and claimed it his own, even in Sammath Naur the very heart of the realm, the Power in Barad-dur was shaken, and the tower trembled from its foundations to its proud and bitter crown. The dark Lord was suddenly aware of him, and his eye piercing all shadows looked across the plain . . . and the magnitude of his folly was revealed to him in a blinding flash, and all the devices of his enemies were at last laid bare. Then his wrath blazed in consuming flame, but his fear rose like a vast black smoke to choke him. For he knew his deadly peril and the thread upon which his doom now hung.

From all his policies and webs of fear and treachery, from all his stratagems and wars, his mind shook free; and throughout his realm a tremor ran, his slaves quailed, and his armies halted, and his captains suddenly steerless, bereft of will, wavered and despaired. For they were forgotten. The whole mind and purpose of the power that wielded them was now bent with overwhelming force upon the mountain. At his summons, wheeling with a rending cry, in a last desperate race there flew, faster than the winds, the Nazgul, the Ringwraiths, and with a storm of winds they hurtled southwards to Mount Doom."

Perhaps in some way, as I cried for Christ, then also the terrible ring of Baba's power too would fall into the chasm of fire, and his seige upon my soul end as a new dawn came at the hour of peril, when I seemed surrounded and beseiged at the very gates of Mordor. Out of nowhere, a vast golden sun would lift up and fill the sky.

When I returned to the chair, I was a different creature, of whom the Scripture says, "Behold, all things are made new." I could share with them two things that had just been told to me. The unretractable assurance to those faithful in Christ, "For I am convinced that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor principalities, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor depth, nor any other created thing, shall be able to separate us from the love of God, which is in Jesus Christ our Lord." (Romans 8:38-39). The other factor pressed into my heart was that I now had a mission, to write another book. Ringing in my mind was a promise, "I shall bring all things unto thy remembrance." Even then, as I was saved, there must have been several hundred things that had been sealed in the storehouse of my mind about Baba, and an unending stream of them had come out. Clear memories of things and events that fell short of deity, of his claims to perfection. Such were the things I was commanded to share with the world about not only this anti-Christ, Baba, but in common with all other anti-Christs, whose flaws only become really evident when they are held up to the standard of God's scripture, and compared with the true and only Messiah.

The others agreed with me that they had never been able to look at the New Testament and interpose Baba in the place of Christ.

When I went on to share some of those discernments against Baba that came railroading out at the moment following salvation, they all agreed, and Mark went on to write down his own list, including the observation of the appalling state of so many devotees who follow Baba, their lack of peace, and everything but love and joy. I was amazed to find that he included the fact that Indra Devi had given Baba a private donation of several hundred thousand rupees. But what all this pointed to was an examination of those on the earth who really have managed to lead lives closest to true grace, perfection, love, joy, hope and contentment. Lives that speak of a goodness that only comes from God. Foremost in my mind was the Carrolls, for they had lived by a standard that was a first ever for me, I just had never really seen such as those living under the lordship of the evangelical gospel; faithful servants, humbly carrying the lamp of love and service, with qualities of character that no psychoanalytic couch could create in a million years of therapy. Not that kind of goodness, purity, not that kind of selfless love. These were God-touched lives that came from a form of deep cleansing that no devil could counterfeit, that only God could do. But I would choose to share about the lives or other Christians who the others in the room didn't know since a saint is rarely honoured in his own home-town. I expected that the others, who hardly knew the Carrolls, barring Surya Das, had taken them for granted. Sure, every religious camp in the world emphasized selfless love but the only people who lived it were the real Christians. Not necessarily those who called themselves Christian as a secular or ethnic label, but those who knew Christ personally and whose lives were defined as Christian by the standards of the Bible. And this was all, the Bible had ever said that the Christians were anyway, a flock; not man's organization, not man's church. Neither the crusade, nor the Inquisition, nor a thousand gaint buildings called churches. Why not? Examine scripture.

Another one of the thousands of decoys used by the deceiver and foisted upon the world was that those under the heading of "Christian," nominal Christians, were the real Christians. And the Devil could say, "Look at their fruits, and you can see what sort of saviour they have." But the tragic fact would remain that the lives of these people was only further proof that they had never been saved in the first place, they had never known Christ as Lord and Saviour. When Constantine nationalized the Christian faith, in one fell swoop, the doorway had been thrust open and a haze of confusion resulted when the flock was greatly adulterated, and it really became hard for the outsider to see the sheep from the goats, the wheat from the darnel.

It would be no accident than that Christ would warn a large crowd of "goats" to span across the centuries, all in his name whom he had never approved of or gathered. Even great church names, among television stars, self-proclaimed prophets, and founders of cults. Indeed, the goats would include those who had even called Christ Lord, and worked miracles in his name. It was in the seventh chapter of Matthew:

"Many will say to Me on that day, 'Lord, Lord, did we not prophecy in Your name, and in Your name cast out demons, and in Your name perform many miracles?'

"And then I will declare to them, 'I never knew you; depart from me you who practice lawlessness.' " Another portion of the gospels would render it, "depart from me ye acursed into everlasting fire." Christ describes this large crowd on his left side as goats.

The criteria for being a Christian would neither be man's own reason, what Aquinas assumed to be the one element that survived the fall and remained perfect, the intellect, nor the declarations of an ecclesiastical body, the government of a formal church, who might formulate a church law here, a canon there, and a decree over here, to forgive sins and bring men or even groups of men into the kingdom by their own newly paved broad pathway, selling penances on the side. Surely not that. Nor would it be the declaration of some super-spiritual mystic, who might use the medium of glossolalia, mumbling over who was saved where and when. The criteria for being in the kingdom could only be found in the Bible, and it could only come from a direct person-to-person encounter with the Living Lord, the Alpha and Omega Himself, through His Holy Spirit, given as a seal of salvation. Indeed, one of the key functions of the Holy Spirit, within the believer, was to give inner assurance of salvation. (Rom. 8:16)

Rather, the true church, the true body of believers was stated in Ephesians (4: 4-6). "You all belong to one body, of which there in one Spirit, just as you all experienced one calling to one hope. There is one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God, one Father of us all who is the one over all, the one working through all, and the one living in all." This kind of knocked out the problem of denominations and put the world-wide and history-wide body of believers more in the dominion of individuals linked together through the headship of Christ. Naturally there were true born-again Christians in every denomination who faithfully tried to serve their Lord as best as possible according to their knowledge, even in many of the most dead, liberal, and apostate churches conceivabe, but this fact never sanctified the entire congregation, it never put God's seal of approval on every edifice across the land using the name of Christ.

And for those who have conveniently called western culture "Christian," well, they had better examine the integrity, consistency, and even scholarship of their premise, a generalization at best. So too should those who have linked up every conquest, exploit, and imperialistic takeover in history with the followers of Christ that is, "The war at Bull Run was fought for Christ." Never. Many not of the faith would find the name expedient, respectable, and a high-sounding camouflage for their cause, military or political. But even an idiot should have the insight to know that words are so often cheap currency.

Ironically, those who so glibly generalized about Christianity were the ones often foremost in knowledgeability about the particulars and complex nuances of political tactics, espionage, and military strategy. They had vast command of a worldly cunning loaded with insight into the nature of trickery. They could tell you all about espionage triple agents, and how great war leaders were able to cloak their movements pretending to head in one direction while deflecting in another. Here the rules were different and words could be used in a special way. But it would not occur to them that great minds of the past employed similar decoy and camouflage tactics in the name of Christ, under the banner of Christianity. No wonder the Jews and half the world were so disillusioned with the so-called church. No wonder I had been a critic of the church all my life. I had been looking down the wrong barrel. I had been tricked. I assumed the generalizations, labels, and pigeon-holes about all these things under the name of Christ as being truly representative of what Christians were. It went right by me and I never paused to think about it any further. I just blindly assumed that this army of incompetents were all Christians. Now I knew.

But there was another problem in reaching those before me, the majority were Jewish. Indeed the majority of all the foreign Baba devotees were Jewish, at least three quarters of them. Even out here in India they were the scattered sons of Israel who had wandered the nations since 70a.d., when the furious army of Titus wreaked destruction upon Israel and its temple. Again, scattered as in the days of Babylon, when they had been found unfaithful to the Living God and sent captive to foreign dominions. Then, as now, their ears had become dull to the voice of their true God. Now they cherished an ethnic identity, seasoned with Yiddish humour, bitterness, and cynicism with perhaps a touch of tolerant sensuality to give life a flavour. Their noblest cause had become humanitarianism, but what of pleasing their God, that foremost precedent of their ancestors before Christ?

Jesus Christ is the Messiah

Not that I knew this with depth of scriptural knowledge just presented, that would take some time to discover, but what I did know about Jesus Christ was sufficient to change my life forever. For I gave what there was of me to the most of what I understood Him to be. To share this with the others in the room might be difficult. As Jews into eastern mysticism, it would be no trouble for them to include Christ with all other supposed avatars. But to suddenly awake out of this dream and go back to the great historical divide between Judaism and Christianity would tend to awaken those stubborn differences. Apparently it did not. At least for a time, those present in the Regent Guest House seemed amazed over Christ.

Margaret would claim Him Lord and Saviour. Her conversion would seen long-range and radical, as she and I became very close very quickly. Barbara and Mark would concede to the purity of Christ and to the demonic nature of Baba. Surya Das would quietly bear through all of this, anxious to go on his pilgrimage.

For now, Betty would be kept in the dark. But in a few days she would sense that a tornado had come amongst us. Mark and

Barbara, by my urging would, within a day, hasten to pack their bags for north India. Early in the morning, Margaret and I would wave goodby to them as they left for the railroad station in a rickshaw. What Betty would find in their trail would be heaps of torn Baba photos, incense, and what not. Her reaction was predictable. To gain greater intimacy with Baba, she would play his double agent and informer while she repented to her errors in associating with us. He would take her in closely for a while, but soon enough, after he got what he needed, he would hold her at a distance again.

By 17 July, Surya Das had tried several times to confront Baba about all this one last time. But he was completely ignored. On that day he would take the train to Pondicherry, where he and I were supposed to meet in a few days, having spent the last four days at the Carrolls with me. After he left, Margaret would move into his room at he Carrolls from the Regent Guest House. She and I would continue talking amongst ourselves and to the Carrolls.

The main mood for all of us who had left Baba was one of cloaked silence should we be in the presence of those still following Baba who were now moving back to the Whitefield-Bangalore area. A quiet discernment in this spiritual warfare told me not to reveal to them what had happened to us. They agreed. Though it was immediately evident that the difference between us and the regular Baba contingent was as night and day.

At one point Margaret and I were afraid that we had blundered. We had decided to go on a sort of private celebration to the Blue Fox, a modern, plush, thoroughly westernized restaurant just completed. For the first time in nineteen months, I would eat fully non-vegetarian food at a restaurant, chateau-briand on a sizzling platter. Margaret would have the same in a snug corner of the restaurant.

We knew that as Christians what we were doing was permissible, to say the least, but there was still that voice of habit accusing us of our folly. Still we knew we were going to have to come back out into the world sooner or later. We could, thank God, lead normal lives again, enjoying the beautiful things of the earth that God had created in the way that was in accord with his will. Margaret and I well knew that when Christ ate with the publicans and fed the fish to the thousands, he too ate meat, saying "It is not what goes into your mouth that defiles you, it is what issues from your heart." (Mark 7 : 15). Both of us had been amazed to discover, when examining Strong's concordance, that rather than supporting vegetarianism, the Bible opposed it as a "doctrine of demons" to emerge in the later times along with enforced prohibition against marriage. (I Tim. 4 : 3) But as I say, Margaret and I were only beginning to walk again, still gun-shy of the others.

Well, just as our plates arrived, Steve and Leslie appeared in the door and were led to a far table. It was like seeing a sniper. Margaret turned when she saw my eyes light up, and I grabbed her hard so she would not jump out of her seat. Our eyes met saying, "Oh, well, there goes a good meal but let's eat it anyway." They would be eating some exotic gourmet vegetarian platter. Within a few minutes, I would coolly go over to their table and greet them. They would seem hurt that Margaret and I had been secretive with them. I would give them several hints saying that more would come later. They would understand. They too, within a month, would leave Baba and head to Nainital to join Ram Dass, Neem Korrolli Baba, Surya Das, Mark, and Barbara and all the Ram Dass freaks. By then, their letters to Margaret in New York would describe Christ as "neat," blessing all the different Indian saints. Indeed the true guru of westerners. What a hair bender, I thought. We would learn that Barbara had been hit by hepatitis on the train to Delhi, Mark would commend me for my wisdom in urging them to go when I did. At a comfortable hotel in Nainital, in the Himalayan foothills, many of the former Baba followers would camp out, using a corner of the hotel as sick bay for hepatitis victims. Leslie would later be amongst them, having contracted it when under Baba.

But what would later be obvious to me was that the conversion of Mark and Barbara had been aborted. They had gained no fear of God nor real spiritual discernment, and had run eagerly to yet another doorway of Mystery Babylon wihthout even bothering to read the placard on the outside. The depth of their former folly had not really humbled them to gain a good healthy mistrust of their own motives and intuitions. Only, then they might, as children, submit to the infallible light of God in the world to direct his people, the word of God. Instead they were back to their old trip of seeking men teachers. They had not made a complete break with the enchanting power and a strand had drawn them back into another web. Quickly they were being blinded again. Soon Barbara would be married in Nainital, in a

Hindu-Christian wedding, so would Eddie and Chris when they arrived. All of them changing their names. A letter from Margaret awaiting me at the American Embassy in Delhi would further inform me that the Nainital ashram was into pot-smoking because it was "okay," according to the one who had written her, since it was vegetarian and natural. "So is hemlock and heroin" I I would reply back to Margaret, who like me, saw their folly. In Deuteronomy I would later discover a strict forbiddance of the use of drugs to "sorcerize" the mind.

As Margaret and I left the Blue Fox heading arm in arm towards Brigade Road yet, another unpleasant jolt would hit us as we passed Wendel sitting on a railing at the street corner talking with of the Baba crowd. We would smile at him and say a quick guarded hello, walking on. His greeting would carry a musing wonder, perhaps even a few pangs of jealousy, that invariable romantic Achilles' Heel that he and I had discussed. Yet I didn't want him to use this as ammunition against us, for I guessed what he was imagining.

It so happened that Margaret, a vibrant full-blooded Jewess, was the prettiest of all the girls as well as intelligent, imaginative and witty. That was the one thing that stuck out the very day of her arrival before the birthday festival, that she was a sort of queen of the girls, beaming with personality. Months back, when we started to meet, we used to joke at the ice-cream stand across from Brindavan. Me riding on my bike, and yelling to the girl's table. Margaret would come over blushing with laughter. She just realized then that her divine mission under Baba was to be the "Miss Fab of Long Island." Her sadhana would be to go back to the states and be the enlightened housewife in samadhi who would walk the runway of Long Island beauties in front of millions on television, and tell them how Baba had done it all. Then she would ride off on a flower-covered fleat smiling at the interviewer and nation-wide audience, telling them about cosmic consciousness, pranayam, and asanas. Then she would break into a fit of giggles in front of me. This same girl who one day left a group of girls and came up to inform me that they had finally figured out who I was in my last life, "King Arthur." The joke was that I "already knew it." We would both, unfortunately, walk away grinning, believing that I was "The Once and Future King, Arthur, King of England." Now, thank heavens, I was just Tal Brooke.

After we got around the corner, we felt a certain morbid parallel between our present adventure and a book I insisted that she read while we stayed at the Carrolls, *Rosemary's Baby* that chilling diabolical thriller about the simple demure girl in a hornet's nest of demonic power. People surrounding her, seducing her, and syphoning the life out of her into the eventual vehicle to carry the devil's baby. Hilda, that sweet old gal, reminded us of the old woman next door, and it went on from there.

When we collected our mail I would discover, by God's timing, yet another hundred-dollar cheque wired to me. This time from Lennie who had just sold the remnant of the stereo system not stolen.

The last time I would see Margaret in India was the night of 20 June when we would hug goodbye on Mahatma Gandhi Road. I would order the rickshaw-driver to take care of her as he drove her twelve miles to Whitefield where she would spend her last days with the Carrolls. Meanwhile I would head to the train terminus to take an all-night train to Pondicherry where I was to meet Surya Das *en route* to leaving India.

But before I leave Bangalore, let us visit the Carrolls in that final week following my conversion at the Regent Guest House.

When Surya Das and I stood on Carroll's porch to move in with them, the evening of 13 July, something happened when my eyes met theirs. Something that indicated the astounding power of that event two thousand years ago when Christ walked the earth, but which did not end there. We were "one in Christ," and they knew it before I could open my mouth. That joy would be difficult to describe. Here was the love put into my heart by an act of grace that I could not drum up in a million years, reaching out to them in gratitude in a personal bond of fellowship that I had never quite known before. Of course I was weak, broken and wretched, carrying many of the scars of two years of hell's discipleship, but if they had seen a bottomless void in my heart before the Ananthapur festival, now they saw a growing torrent of hope in my eyes. A hope filled with faith and joy. I might not be able to articulate the dynamics of this to a hardened skeptic, but he would be faced with that irritating reply given to the Pharisees by the simple congenitally blind man now healed by Christ. "All I can tell you is that wherefore I was once blind, now I see." (John 9 : 25). A modern miracle of salvation, the greatest of all miracles.

I knew then, as I knew when I finally left them during a deeply emotional embrace, that these guardians of the gosple, these salt of the earth saints, had been considerable agents in my salvation. To them, they were only faithfully serving their Lord, the duty expected of them. To me, this was a cause for eternal gratitude. I knew that in the height of heaven, I would one day look at their radiant faces and wash their feet with my tears. For had they not poured out their lives as a living sacrifice to God, my destiny might eternally be divorced from the face of God. I might be consigned to the most horrible damnation. Instead, they were my spiritual parents as well as brothers and sisters in the Lord, fellow members of the fold.

This brought up another matter, the cost of discipleship. Along with my new freedom, I was also a servant. There was an incredible responsibility in being a Christian. Not a pie-in-the-sky easy-believism that the enemy likes to present to dilute the true gospel, but the walk under Christ where we too are used of God, and accountable in the salvation of other—in spreading the word, living the life, and pouring oneself out to others. Not a conveyor-belt Christianity of impersonal confrontations and printed tracts alone, but the cost of taking the other person in.

A saint by the name of C.S. Lewis would put it very succinctly when I would read his *Mere Christianity*, a writer with whom I saw eye to eye with, on just about everything. In a sermon he had given entitled, "The Weight of Glory" appearing in another book, it would be even more succinct. "The . . . weight . . . of my neighbour's glory should be laid daily on my back, a load so heavy that only humility can carry it, and the backs of proud will be broken. It is a serious thing to live in a society of possible heavenly creatures to remember that the dullest and most uninteresting person you can talk to may one day be a creature which, if you saw it now, you would be strongly tempted to worship, or else a horror and corruption such as you now meet, if at all, end only in a nightmare. All day long we are in some degree helping each other to one or other of these destinations. It is in the light of these overwhelming possibilities, it is with awe and circumspection proper to them that we should conduct all our dealings with one another, all friendships, all loves, all play, all politics. There are no ordinary people. You have never talked to mere mortal. Nations, cultures, arts, civilizations—these are mortal, and their life is to ours as the life of a gnat. But it is immortals whom we joke with, work with, marry, snub, and exploit—immortal horrors or overlasting splendours." Clearly Lewis was talking about the resurrection to everlasting judgement, for from the face of God where men would be eternally consigned, or the bliss of heaven itself, in the very fellowship of highest deity. And this reflected back on us and our daily lives.

Indeed it was just this kind of stand that would bring in opposition. Not the contented good neighbourly policy with the devil of so many modernist and apostate "Christians." The dial-a-prayer wide entrance that would look at God as a one-armed bandit, a wish-fulfilling tree. Rather the straight and narrow way was costly, even up until your very life. The Lord said, (John 15:18) "If the world hates you, you know that it has hated Me before it hated you. If you were of the world, the world would love its own; but because you are not of the world, but I chose you out of the world, therefore the world hates you." What this meant was spiritual opposition and warfare for any Christian who was salt, who was not neutralized into a diluted belief or a cowardice to say and speak even when his life was on the line. That was exactly why the world was turned upside down at one time, and why so many of them were martyred for it. But they had the blessed hope to look forward to, eternal life. And were told Matt (10:28), "Do not be afraid of those who kill the body, but cannot kill the soul. Rather be afraid of the one who can destroy both soul and body in hell." And it was this empowering by God that turned the frightened cowering disciples in hiding after the crucifixion, into emboldened apostles that could face off any crowd. Supernaturally, they were promised "the peace that passeth all understanding, "and surely it came. What mattered was that they were on the winning side. When God's clock ran out for human history, the shifting tide would be devastating. But then, unlike now, salvation would no longer be in the offing. God had even stated that this was the reason that he withheld judgement upon the earth so that more men would turn to him in the final hour.

An hour when evil was on the increase as the "restraining power" would be removed. It would really be the devil's world for a while, the beast would get a brief reign, but were betide those who had aligned with him, rejecting God in the process. For surely if God did not hate evil, how could he be good? The New Testament was strewn with passages about the latter days. Days where the world would finally be in waiting for the anti-Christ. A not too attractive world of ultra-sensual kicks, where men of learning will have cleverly fooled people into laughing off the Truth before they even gave it an honest thought. Paul wrote to Timothy and said (II Tim. 3:1-5) "But you must realize that in the last days the times will be full of danger. Men will become utterly self-centered, greedy for money, full of big words. They will be proud and contemptuous, without any regard for what their parents taught them. They will be utterly lacking in gratitude, purity and normal human affection. They will be men of unscrupulous speech and have no control of themselves. They will be passionate and unprincipled, treacherous, self-willed and conceited, loving all the time what gives them pleasure instead of loving God. They will maintain a facade of "religion", but their conduct will deny its validity."

They would contemptuously mock all that is good. You can imagine where they would stand in the eyes of a holy God, not deserving much sympathy when their souls would be on the balance. In his letter to Rome (Chapter 1:18-32) Paul talked of the dynamics of wilful atheism. The pride of it, yes, a little like Beckett's existential pride that is so amazed that it can walk around with its head held high in a meaningless cosmos. Paul would say, "They knew all the time that there is a God, yet they refused to acknowledge him as such, or thank him for what he is or does. Thus they became fatuous in their argumentations, and plunged their silly minds still further into the dark. Behind a facade of "wisdom" they became just fools, who would exchange the glory of the immortal God for an imitation .... They gave up God; and therefore God gave them up—to be the playthings of their own foul desires in dishonouring their own bodies."

These hard words were the unpopular side of Christianity, but I was not about to deny them now. I knew they were true. I had always known it in my conscience. Now I need not fear them, I loved them. I loved the truth and hated evil. I loved love and hated those same things God did in the Bible. This was a little new for me. Can you imagine me, a sinner for so long, beginning to hate evil. That's because I was beginning to see what it was doing in the world. It was mangling people's souls in the hands of the adversary, this fallen spirit being used to watch over entire galaxies, whose I.Q. was probably over half a million. He didn't need any think-tanks. He was one, a super think-tank, having himself once been described as king of the domain of subtlety. This was the "Lord of the Air" Paul spoke of in his letter to the Ephesians, the one who made war on God's people throughout the centuries. Yet my hatred for him, due to the scars on me, far outweighed any fear I had of him. I was happy to stand against him in Christ.

Indeed no sooner had I come to Christ than to find myself at the very crossroads of spiritual warfare. Apparently I was a rather hot item. I could blow the whistle. To quote another author, I was "marked for total disposal," since I was not the type to stay silent about my knowledge. But now I felt as Paul being lowered in a straw basket down a long drop from the high wall of Damascus. God's people had to be resourceful too. When I left Bangalore, my cloak of secrecy as to my whereabouts would be almost total. God, doubtless, was protecting me, but it was not for me to put him to the test.

As I would learn the essentials of Christian doctrine from the Carrolls during the day, at night I would face the adversary, Baba, in my dreams constantly. He would argue, persuade, hold out great possibilities for me, then, when I didn't succumb, I would be threatened with annihilation. Using the name of Christ, I would blow him out of my presence like a bomb. Every night these dreams went on, even while I was travelling across India, they would occasionally come. In one dream, Baba was on stage imitating the so-called miracle, Saint Sophia. Baba would detect my presence in the auditorium, and there would be a show-down. I would see one Baba after another laughing and running out of a guarded doorway through a clearing to the rear stage entrance of the central auditorium. In another dream, as Baba argued with me, his face began to peel off and swim with maggots.

But what really drove shivers down my back was a literal near miss with Baba on one of my last days at Whitefield. It was getting dark. I had just gotten off the bus half a mile from the Carrolls, and I was walking cautiously down the road near a wide bank where the trees thickened. A chill filled the air. Then I noticed directly in front of me quietly floating down the empty road, Baba's sleek long station-wagon with the tinted windows rolled up and headlights on. Without making any quick moves, I edged over into the obscure shadows of the side bushes. The limousine glided by, not more than thirty feet away as the side window blackly reflected at me in full view. Now I could really feel the diabolical power of Baba as the headlights swept by. He was most likely going on a dinner engagement in Bangalore, this soul eater. Then, quietly like a hearse, the vehicle moved on into the growing darkness.

But there was always victory in the air over this adversary. Within a day, Margaret and I would go to the Bangalore Mission's Church, meeting two missionary friends of the Carrolls, Joe and Edith Mullins. They would look into my eyes and smile with a long, satisfied joy. "So, you are Tal Brooke. The former Baba zealot. Do you know that the Carrolls and our entire congregation have, over the last six months, been praying for you specifically. That the Lord deliver you out of the hands of Baba. And reveal to you some hidden aspect of Baba's evil; and that you then write another book on him, this time exposing him." Margaret and I shook hands with these two dear souls, and walked on. I began to get an inkling of the power of prayer, how it had exposed Baba, how it had helped release me. The Carrolls and their friends, now all brethren in the Lord, had done more for me than just feed me and talk with me, they had prayed that for me.

But should I now be flippant about my salvation, and assume that I could never be deceived? God forbid. And the Carrolls well knew the danger. "Therefore let him who thinks he stands take heed lest he fall." (I Cor. 10: 12.) to Just as Christ had warned even his apostles, I too would be warned of the leaven of false doctrine. Paul had written to Timothy, his disciple of long acquaintance, to "guard the gospels," even with his life. The Bible was filled with repeated warnings of holding fast to the true Faith and avoiding all false teachings. Paul stresses this by saying, "For I determined to know nothing among you except Jesus Christ and Him crucified." (I Cor. 2: 2.) In Acts, when he finally leaves port, Paul declares to them the gravity of their responsibility, that they not be misled ". . . My conscience is clear as far as any of you is concerned, for I have never shrunk from declaring to you the complete will of God. Now be on your guard for yourselves and for every flock of which the Holy Spirit has made you guardians—you are to be shepherds to the Church of God, which he won at the cost of his own blood. I know that after my departure, savage wolves will come in among you without mercy for the flock. Yes, and even from among you men, will arise speaking perversions of the Truth, trying to draw away the disciples . . . . This is why I tell you to keep on the alert, remembering that for three years I never failed night and day to warn every one of you, even with tears in my eyes." (Acts 20: 26-30.) No *savoire faire* trust in some passive walk where "Jesus is guiding us, have no fear." Not this. Paul knew better than that. Caution was not at all unchristian when it came to weighing the teachings of men. Only one jealous enough for the integrity of God's simple truth would care enough to persistently measure everything he heard by Scripture. "He who is spiritual judgeth all things." (I Cor. 2 : 15.)

I had seen so many perversions of the truth all my life, that if I came out of this acid test of India with anything, it was with a fearful, loving, and reverential jealousy for the purity of the unblemished word of God, where I might contend for the true faith. For now I was satisfied with nothing else but that. Too esoteric a Christian teaching, too complex a theology, too ambitious a spiritual system, and then one could see the leaven of pride entering. Where the teacher might say, "But now let us get beyond all that simple gospel stuff, that early Testament simplistic approach, and enter the deep things of God, the advanced heavenlies." For me a warning light would go on. In no time the teacher would be heading back into astral planes, mindlessness as a way of meditation and so on.

The apostle John was not "fair-minded" or lax about false teachers. He knew enough to despise them, so did the Holy Spirit who said, "The man who is so 'advanced' that he is not content with what Christ taught, has in fact no God . . . . If any teacher comes to you who is disloyal to what Christ taught, don't have him inside your house. Don't even wish him 'God-speed', unless you want to share in the evil that he is doing." (II John 9-11.)

The Carrolls could not stress this enough, even with fear and trembling. They had seen too many snipped away at the bud by following some self-appointed prophet or teacher who introduced deviations of the truth. But how could I ever know? The scripture is that perfect standard, inerrant and infallible, "delivered once for all to the saints." The God who holds the stars in their courses con preserve the meaning of His word infallibly. Were we absolutely dependent upon men teachers (note, the Bible prohibits women teachers)? No. As ministers to the body of Christ, his world church, they are worthy for building up once they have been tried as true saints, but as for their being indispensable for an individual Christian to maintain his salvation, again, no. Let us find out about another function of the Holy Spirit, "It is true that I felt I had to write the above about men who would dearly love to lead you astray. Yet I know that the touch of his Spirit never leaves you, and you don't really need a human teacher. You know that Spirit teaches you about all things, always telling you the truth and never telling you a lie. So as He has taught you, live continually in Him." (I John 2: 26-28.) In truth then, I could be teleported to a lonely mountain-top in Ghana for the rest of my life and never be thrust out of His presence. True Christians stood on an immovable rock, no man could rob us of our "crown of salvation," if, like Timothy, we followed His simple commands, abiding in His word, holding on to our crown of salvation, while we stood firm in the true faith giving our very lives if we had to.

Was it not true that Christendom was in a mess now, I would ask the Carrolls? Yes, it was, it was swarming with problems of all sorts. But then again the Bible had warned us of this all along, hadn't it? We should know to expect it. The adversary, predictably, had attached from within. He had tried to undermine the word of God at the turn of the century through a massive academic endeavour which purported to be seeking the truth, using highsounding words and academic piety to foist itself upon society as the final voice of authority concerning the reliability of Scripture. Since then, most of the seminaries had embraced this leaven, an ultimately man-centered philosophy, delighting in their new freedom to tolerate sin. Now it would be taught that the Bible was "unscientific and riddled with mistakes," but never mind, it had good moral teaching and poetic beauty. Now we could each write our own experiential Bibles by entering into private mystical trade winds. But I didn't buy it, either. I had just been through that very Auschwitz of the soul, and hated it. When I would later hear the arrogant pontification of a self-proclaimed "cerebral Christian" espousing Bultmann or Barth, or Tillich, or Kierkegaard, my soul would shudder, and I would ask, "Have you, proud little fellow, any idea of whom and before whose Holy presence you speak, as God, right now, looks down upon you? You chit-chat about the weighty things of God as though it were a hobby, and one day you will stand before His Holy Might and be totally accountable, eating your own words. Your faith has become spoilt, but take heed lest you spoil the faith of others, and make them twice the sons of hell that you are."

And then there would be cults galore canvassing neighbourhoods with their own tracts and publications: Mormons, Jehovah's Witnesses, Christian Scientists, Children of God, and a hundred other cults, deviating from the true faith, all founded by individual men or women whose own records were in question. Invariably, each taught that his was the only way. And each cult, systematically, would turn a screw into some fundamental keystone of the faith in an attempt to undermine one or another backbone or key principle of Biblical teaching. The followers would most likely come on like "American pie," wearing respectable suits and short hair, and speak with a wholesome sincerity, but . . . did this histrionic validate them and show us the secret recesses of their hearts that only God can know? Certainly not. If their teachings contradicted scripture, then with what side should we take allegiance? On the side of the God who speaks through the Bible, and not Mary Baker Eddy, Charles Tate Russell, and Joseph Smith.

On the afternoon of 20 July, the Carrolls and I would have a final embrace, tears welling up in our eyes. I was a son and a brother now going out into the wilderness again, but forever with the guiding light of God. I was saved, but my life they knew, was only just a beginning. The breadth and depth of the Faith was wider than the universe, and now there was the burden that my life be fruitful and deserving of the Lord, that I die to myself daily, and enter the kind of faithful stewardship that the Carrolls had set for me as an example which, in itself, had been no small thing in my coming to salvation. They knew of the importance of the book that I was called to write, and would pray for it incessantly.

On the train to Pondicherry, I felt like Frodo in Mordor, on a mission of great importance. Obscurity, above all, was critical in my escape from India. I would write to almost no one, being ambiguous even to my parents as to why I was leaving India. As the train clickety-clacked, I remembered June's quiet disappearance. In what seemed a wave of fear, she left Brindavan one day. Ironically, India and Marsha met her on the train headed for Madras, describing her as guarded, frightened and white as a ghost. June had been living in Baba's house and now she was suddenly leaving, not even saying goodbye to any of us, long time fellow disciples. Now I would soon discover from the Consul at the American Consulate in Madras, that she had confided some unpleasant experience to him. She would take her autistic son out of the Madras clinic, after panicking and walking helter-skelter about the consulate to clear visa matters. Soon she would be off to America. That had been some months ago. Later, Barbara with the baby would leave Baba and fly to New York, joining Margaret there. But I knew that all this would not so much as make a dent in Baba's mountainous mission. These people were small fry, according to him.

At Pondicherry I would be with Surya Das for ten days, getting sea and sun witnessing to the ashram residents about Christ's salvation; the well known writer, Sat Prem, would turn a cold shoulder, and Diana, a bare-skulled woman renunciant, attendant of the "Mother," would smile. By God's providence, I would get darshan with the ninety-six-year old "Mother," that most occult creature overlooking the domain, again like a pterodactyl. As my eyes fused into her dark orbs, I would look right down them boldly, saying the Lord's prayer within my heart. She would be undergoing a tremor underneath. Her thick neck bending forward like a giant mesh of cables, eyes fully imbecilic from the side. Yet head-on they were laser-like. As I stared at her, having known the fire, in the confidence of the Holy Spirit, she would seem shaken after one of her longest known eye-to-eye darshans. She would say something conciliatory, in French, to the attendant, but I knew that the spirit inside her, this foreign entity, knew well its eventual destiny in the hands of the Living God, and that its days of deception were numbered. Would this "shakti" of Aurobindo's immortalize her body as she claimed? Hardly, for within three years her obituary would appear in Time magazine.

Once I reached Madras, by 3 August, I would discover another hundred dollars wired to me, this time for a car I had left with a friend to sell. It had come with a strange kind of timeliness. As I stood on a street corner on Mount Road reading Newsweek about some thirteen-year-old avatar boy wonder known as Maharajji, and thinking that indeed this is an age of anti-Christs, I would vomit. By nightfall I would have a temperature of 104°F, remembering a dream I had had a few nights before about contracting yellow jaundice. Other symptoms would soon follow. And for three days I would lie in a dark, seedy Madras YMCA dorm room, vomiting anything I ate or drank, knowing full well that my liver was disintegrating.

When my temperature subsided, Surya Das and I would go hunting before he went on to north India. Madras Central would be a nightmare of rusty needles, crammed rooms of hundreds, even lying on the floor, oily thin brown bodies like toothpicks. The red tape to get in would be incredible. After walking miles of corridor, back and forth across the hospital with my bags, I would finally hammer the desk of some official in a musty hall as he smiled back at me.

I suddenly walked out, got into a cab, and by faith headed for a small, clean, private mission hospital. It was beautiful, Saint Isabell's, and for two weeks I would eat fish and vegetables, three good meals a day in a clean private room off a cool verandah. I read the Bible, while I felt a quiet strengthening of soul, spirit, and body. Knowing that the illness allowed me time to privately dwell on the Lord, the great hope within, and God's timing. This illness, indeed, was more of a natural purging of two debilitating years in India, a peasant's diet, bad water, and heat, and, as I would discover once in London, a colon swimming with large parasitic round-worms which would continue to sap my strength for another six months, but not enough to stop my rapid recuperation from jaundice. In the meantime, I had received a clear command from the Lord to utterly scrap the pro-Baba book about to be released in Culcutta. When I sent them the wire, my conscience and soul jumped for joy. A greater conviction had given me a deep certainty about God's plan for the book that you are now reading.

After two weeks of hospitalization, feeling much stronger, I left the hospital, and almost immediately boarded a Grand Trunk Express to Delhi on 25 August. The excitement of the drama burnt in the pit of my stomach. Even the wear and tear of the two-day train ride through one cauldron of heat to another would not ripple my purposive joy. For if obstacles came, it would only be to be overcome.

The final stretches of my escape journey from India rolled by in a happy-sad nostalgia as I took a rickshaw from the New Delhi station across town to the Diplomatic Enclave surrounding the international youth hostel, the modern Vishwa Yuvak Kendra, where I had my heart on staying. The early morning sights floated by like a mist. But when I entered the lobby, it seemed my plan had been once again sabotaged. The entire building had been taken over by the Peace Corps, and countless travellers had been turned away before me. I stood tired and slightly jaundiced, waiting to see the head of the Peace Corps after few words of encouragement from my former friend, the Indian Manager of the Kendra.

Then I lowered my head to pray. My eyes met those of the Peace Corps Director, and he gave me a standard explanation that they were renting the premises and that due to certain rules my staying was out of the question. I confidently told him why I should stay to lead a seminar on eastern metaphysics versus Judeo-Christianity. He thought. I told him more about it, my credentials, my beliefs. All I wanted was one spare dorm bed for five rupees a night. He agreed.

And surely, for the next two weeks, if you had entered, you would have seen Tal Brooke, several nights a week, giving a seminar to fifty or sixty eager faces from the mid-west, America's backbone of clean-cut brawn and young hopefuls; about the great eastern dream and its perils by one who had gone down that road. It was not a panacea, it was death. And the travail of the land and its mortifications were not proof of a higher spirituality but a warning sign that something was amiss. More like those lands that have been accursed in the Bible. They would, in the end, hear the gospel of Christ through my testimony. They were fascinated.

In the meantime I made my friends, ate with them, walked with them, went to movies with them. They would later write and remember me, always inquiring about my book.

Yet if things had gone with miraculous smoothness so far, there was another titanic wall to climb before I escaped the land to write my book. You see, since I had been a resident for two years, they had to wire Mysore State to get a police release on my standing, for I had to be cleared. What the enemy might do, I had long ago anticipated, was trump up a civil offence charge against me that would be enough to incarcerate me in a Delhi prison for five years.

Here is how it worked and you can decide whether or not you see the hand of the Lord at work behind the scenes. Let us remember that in a state of panic my Calcutta publisher had already written Kasturi about my shocking change of heart, ordering him to scrap the book. It would create a quiet panic in Puttaparthi. Possibly a cable from Delhi to one of Baba's henchmen, the

Superintendent of Police, Bangalore, would be felt across the web immediately, thus driving the machinery of Baba into motion; half the influential citizens of the state, industrialists, and profesionals, on up to Dharma Vira, the Governor of Mysore State, all on the grape-vine of high priority channels to Baba's throne. The bureaucratic spinning-wheel would roll, false accusations drummed up, the more influential the source the better, and a resounding, "Permission to leave India not granted. Detain suspect for legal action," would leap across the Mysore teletype to central headquarters in Delhi by early afternoon. Thus Baba might trap me yet, should God not intervene.

First, I had to be financially cleared before I could even apply for an exit visa. In the first week of September, I took a rickshaw across Delhi to a huge office building. I tried to conceal my nervousness. This was no small obstacle. If I did not have every receipt for each travellers' cheque cashed at a Bank, where they were all supposed to be cashed anyway, then they could legally begin an investigation while detaining me in Delhi indefinitely. I had no receipts at all but the ones just recently cashed in Delhi and Madras.

In a large office, I looked the inspector right in the eye. My receipts had been lost somewhere along the line, possibly on a train. "So you don't have any of them, eh?"

This would go on for a while. I would remain cool. He would look at the passport that I have arrived with, a diplomatic passport, since I was the son of a diplomat. But my father had retired and the passport had been cancelled, being replaced with an ordinary passport which I also had. Still, the diplomatic passport carried great prestige. I would suggest to him that after riding in so many trains it was a miracle that I had my passports safe much less any receipts. He would pause, smile, open my passport and stamp it with a seal of approval from his office. We would cordially shake and I would calmly walk out, heart going wild. But, that was still only the first wall.

In order to even apply for an exit visa I needed a plane ticket. That, I would find out, after one or two visits to the large office complex near the Delhi Parliament. But by perfect timing my family had picked up a charter ticket within a few days of returning to London from their trip to America. You know how it worked. It was the only charter plane of several to leave India within the month, I had the last seat available, the rates were due to go up, and the flight would leave within three days of the ticket's arrival. But if I did not get the exit visa, I would forfeit the entire flight, because that was a charter flight rule. I could not legally even apply for an exit visa except within forty eight hours of the plane's departure. So it was a one-shot affair.

I would arrive at the police headquarters in the government enclave. The room would be filled with weary foreigners, tormented and bored mystics, all prisoners of red tape, all in the clutches of bureaucratic power-games.

I would hear an official say to someone, "But, sir, your passport has expired, it is no good." There would be a yell of consummate irritation from some wasted, shaved, skulled, renunciant.

I sat down at the inspector's desk the fourth day in a row, finally with a ticket within forty-eight hours of the plane's departure with all my papers in order, wondering what they would find wrong next. Now all they needed to do was send that fateful teletype to the police-inspector in Mysore.

"But sir, we cannot do anything until Monday."

"Just a second. By then my plane will have left. Now look here, this is not my fault that there is a government holiday on now. I did exactly what your office told me to do. I came here with a ticket within forty-eight hours of the plane's departure. It is a charter and cannot be transferred. Now. . .you carry the ball." I was sweating and was holding out my diplomatic passport once again to remind him of my background.

"Okay, sir. You will please remain here for one minute if you don't mind." I was to see the top brass. I always went to the top. And now I felt a great forceful insistence on behalf of my case.

In a larger office I argued, leaning forward on the desk and watching the official through clouds of acrid smoke. "Listen to me, I came here on a diplomatic passport. Do you think I came here to do anything other than come on my intended mission of inquiry? (I showed him my hard-bound Calcutta Baba book) . . . No, I am a Christian, praise God, I am a Christian."

"Oh then, you are not a follower of our spiritual yoga and gurus then?"

"No, not any more." I responded with grave finality. If I had to sell out on Christ to get out of India, then I would wait for eternity in this office rather than earn an expedient exit visa. I knew that I might be put to the test right here.

"Well, it seems only you westerners desire to follow our gurus.

Few of our people have genuine interest in these matters any more."

"Okay, but let's get back to the exit visa. I want you to stick to your word. I am now challenging your honour. You know what your office has told me. Now wire Mysore and they will clear me. My record is spotless with that office. The superintendent was even a friend of mine."

"But sir, it is a holiday, the office there is closed today. It will not open until Monday."

"If for any reason they do not approve of my leaving, you can reach me through my embassy. Don't you think America would graciously send me back if something were wrong challenging our countries' relations? Now I refuse to lose this flight. It is not my fault that you all have a holiday on this crucial day."

Finally I heard, "Okay sir. I will wire them in any case. They may have someone there. You come back this afternoon and if they have replied it will be okay. And if not, I will stamp your passport in any case."

I shook him by his hand and left with dignity, careful not to celebrate prematurely. I would return to learn that the Mysore teletype had not answered. I looked into his eyes and handed him my open passport. Reluctantly, he took out his stamp, looked at it, and pressed the stamp upon the open page. I pressed back the surge of relief within me, extending my hands coolly for the gentleman's handshake. And I would walk out down the street into obscurity, a zest of energy driving me on and on, and then I would hold up my hands and yell. Only to bow my head then and pray.

But it was not all over yet. Mysore might still cable in urgency, I might get detained at the final gate to the plane's ramp. Or the charter people might have miscalculated and booked too many passengers.

I would refuse to believe it was over until the jets were whining and I was fastened into my seat. Meanwhile the clock ticked away the hours of that final day before the plane's departure.

I composed an absolutely devasting seven-page letter to the American community now back again at the main ashram. Copies were sent to the Carrolls, Hilda, and other people. This would be the final bomb to be mailed my last day. It was a chance. With wrong timing, and the gates of hell might still pour forth, should my exit from India be aborted. The letter would reach them a week after my plane left. If I was detained, the battle would reach new dimensions. But still, a feeling of faith urged me on to mail it. Otherwise, I could see Baba, with some long-distance telekinesis, melting the electrical system in the cockpit, not from my letter but from the Delhi teletype in some last moment panic. The Delhi authorities will have assumed that my plane left the day before. There was a last-minute shift in departure time.

The final night at the Kendra, I would mask this incredible drama going on from the others and give a forceful seminar. In these consummating moments with them in India, I told them of the Adversary, the Son of Perdition, who had his own Messiahs, who had formed his own Satanic system of religious mysticism so subtle in its wonderful travesty of the Truth that myriads had fallen in love with the illusion as one might fall in love with physical beauty. But the Serpent also had been beautiful. In one place, the Bible speaks directly to this fallen spirit being by addressing a mortal, the King of Tyre, as an immortal being, as though this immortal spirit operated behind a mortal frame. The seminar group listened intently as I read them Ezekiel (28: 11-17), a verse I had found through the Strong's Concordance while at the Carrolls,

> Again the word of the Lord came to me saying,
> Son of man, take up a lamentation over the King of
> Tyre, and say to him, "Thus says the Lord God,
> You had the seal of perfection in beauty."
>
> You were in Eden, the garden of God;
> every precious stone was your covering;
> the ruby, the topaz, and the diamond;
> The beryl, the onyx, and the jasper;
> the lapis lazulis, the turquoise, and the emerald;
> and the gold, the workmanship of your settings and sockets,
> was in you. On the day you were created, they were prepared.
>
> You were the anointed cherub who covers;
> and I placed you there.
> You were on the Holy Mountain of God;
> You walked in the midst of the stones of fire.
>
> You were blameless in your ways
> from the day you were created,

> until iniquity was found in you.
>
> By the abundance of your trade
> you were internally filled with violence,
> and you sinned;
> Therefore I have cast you as profane
> from the Mountain of God.
> And I have destroyed you, O covering cherub,
> from the midst of the stones of fire.
>
> Your heart was lifted up because of your beauty;
> You corrupted your wisdom by reason of your
> splendour.
> I cast you to the ground . . . .

By Christ, this same creature was called, "The Lord of this world," by Paul, "the Prince of the Power of the air," or Lord of the air. He would operate through the King of Tyre, as the King of Tyre would control the Prince of Tyre, whom Solomon, for all his wisdom, had chosen to be the chief mason of the Temple of Solomon. This leaven had devastating subtlety.

In contrast, I read the seminar group several interesting *slokas* from India's most holy book, *The Bhagavad Gita*, about Arjuna seeing Krishna in his "Universal Form," the most sacred part of the Gita. By the word of God in the Bible, the true identity of the one described in the vision of the "Universal Form," Krishna would be most clearly revealed.

> Chapter 11, Verse 24. When I see you touching the sky, blazing with many colours with mouths wide open, with large fiery eyes, my heart trembles in fear and I find neither courage nor peace, O Vishnu.
>
> Verse 29. As months rush headlong into a blazing fire for destruction, so do these creatures hurriedly speed into your mouths for their destruction.
>
> Verse 30. Devouring all the worlds on every side with your flaming mouths, you lick your lips. Your fiery rays filling the whole world with radiance, are burning, O Vishnu.
>
> Verse 32. The blessed Lord said: I am the mighty world destroying Time now engaged in wiping out the world. Even without you, the warriors arrayed in hostile armies shall not live.

Krishna, was revealed as Death, Chronos, or Time, and the Destroyer. I closed the Gita and proclaimed the destiny of Satan, and his countless appearances as Krishna, Pan, Siva, Vishnu, and others, in a most hopeful proclamation in the Bible. What would befall Vishnu whose land, Bharata, wailed in disease, starvation and idolatry? Whose greatest spiritual treasure was in fact spiritual pride and the conviction that she carried the world's monopoly on spiritual wisdom and could not possibly be in error.

> Revelation (19:19-20): And I saw the beast and the kings of the earth and their armies, assembled to make war against Him who sat upon the horse, and against His army. And the beast was seized, and with him the false prophet who performed signs in his presence, by which he deceived those who had received the mark of the beast and those who worshipped his image; these two were thrown alive into the lake of fire . . .
>
> Revelation (20:1): And I was an angel coming down from heaven having the key of the abyss and a great chain in his hand. And he laid hold of the dragon, the serpent of old, who is the Devil and Satan (whose names are also the Destroyer, Time, and Death), and bound him for a thousand years . . . . Verse 10: And the Devil who deceived them was thrown into the lake of fire and brimstone, where the beast and the false prophet are also; and they shall be tormented day and night for ever and ever. Finally, Verse 14: And death and—ades were thrown into the lake of fire. This is the second death, the lake of fire. And if anyone's name was not found written in the book of life, he was thrown into the lake of fire.

But, as I smiled at them, I assured them it did not end there. For there was a splendour unimaginable to those faithful in God, who loved the Living God and believed in the name of his true Messiah, Jesus Christ. Chapter 21:1 proclaimed, And I saw a new heaven and a new earth; for the first heaven and the first earth passed away, and there is no longer any sea." The Lord Himself would wipe the tears from our eyes, and we would reign with him for ever and ever.

At six in the morning I stood with a nervous crowd in the airport waiting room. A previous charter plane the day before had been cancelled. But our plane was waiting outside. The others from the other plane would have to wait for another plane.

By seven, we started to board. I got to the gate. The guard looked at my passport. "Excuse me, sir, but your exit visa was for a plane yesterday evening. It is seven hours expired sir. You will have to get another." I looked him in the eyes. His superier and other officials sat at a desk behind me. I went right to them with him. Eyes met. "Is it my fault that the plane was delayed? What in heaven's name can I do now with the plane about to leave? Your office in Delhi is closed right now. This plane is my only chance. Now I want to get on." The official gave the guard a slow nod, and with a red stamp, the guard marked my passport, "Delhi airport, Palam, 14 September, 1971." I would go through the gate waving to them.

I held my breath tensely until we were in the air. Twenty minutes later we took off. I was still feeling tense as long as we were over India. For I did not underestimate the machinations of India to radio back the plane. But as the clear Arabian Sea sparkled up from below, a radiant emerald green, then I exalted. Then my heart leapt for joy, and I sang a quiet hymn to God, and I felt all heaven rejoicing with me. Gone from dominion over my soul would be the Lord of the Air, forever. The throne of my true Lord was in highest heaven, Lord of Lords and King of Kings.

Appendix—The Gospel and World Events

As a product of modern Jewery, those present were indoctrinated from babyhood into a strong anti-Christian bias. Christ would be a magician and a bastard (The historical accounts of Josephus affirmed this common belief among his people the Jews), the writings of the New Testament accursed and the atrocities of "Christianity" against the Jews would prove the diabolical nature of the religion. Should a zealous Jew find a true Christian with Christian love and character, then this was a little more difficult for him to write off. But it could be done; the person was a simple-minded Gentile, now more deceptive in the very nature of his apparent goodness.

Yet even the Jewish historian Josephus would predict, to his discredit, that the name of Christ would be banished from the earth in a few hundred years from his time when Roman rule still encompassed the earth. He too might have remembered the words of Gamaliel the Elder, leader of the Pharisee party, and high member of the Sanhedrin then interrogating the apostles, these Christians who were now so irritatingly zealous in the wake of their Master's death, and now with sudden disappearance of the body so carefully protected, were proclaiming him alive.

Gamaliel would finally stand up in fear of God and announce, "And so in the present case, I say to you, stay away from these men and let them alone, for if this plan or action should be of men, it will be overthrown; but if it be of God, you will not be able to overthrow them; or else you may even be found to be fighting against God Himself." (Acts 5: 38-39).

True to history, the Jews were incredibly tenacious, yet incredibly stubborn as well. Their rabbis, as theological spokesmen, would find a way out, an argument to explain anything. Even the scattering of the nation. From Hillel to Maimonides to Buber they paved the way to eventually symbolizing the Torah and prophets. And Rabbi Akiba, in the beginning of the second century, would scrap the long acclaimed Septuagint, so carefully translated from Hebrew to Greek by the seventy scholars and Jewish Elders, a standard in the time of Christ, for a translation so excessively literal that the import of the true meaning would be obscured. For the construction would be thoroughly Hebraic, the words Greek. But this would achieve the rabbis' purpose. It would obscure key prophecies that the Nazarene sect used so convincingly in those days to argue the Messiahship of Christ Jesus. Judah would not hear. She would wander the nations adamant that she was not out of the will of God, no matter how distant Jehovah was, even though Israel, in centuries past, saw great and many miracles. Now she would be embarrassed before the heathen nations at God's silence, at his distance in those hours of peril among so in many Jews of the diaspora under peril, from the cruelties of Rome to modern Hitler.

Yet Moses had warned them, "But it shall come about, if you will not obey the Lord your God, to observe to do all His commandments and his statutes which I charge you today, that all these curses shall come upon you and overtake you." (Deut. 28-15)

"And it shall come about that as the Lord delighted over you to prosper you, and multiply you, so the Lord will delight over you to make you to perish and destroy you; and you shall be torn from the land where you are entering to possess it.

"Moreover, the Lord will scatter you among all peoples, from one end of the earth to the other end of the earth; and there you shall serve other gods, wood and stone, which you or your fathers have not known.

"And among those nations you shall find no rest, and there shall be no resting place for the sole of your foot; but there the Lord will give you a trembling heart, failing eyes, and despair of the soul" (Deut 28:63-65).

Christ well knew this and said, "O Jerusalem, Jerusalem thou that killest prophets and stonest them which are sent unto thee, how often I would have gathered thy children together, even as a hen gathereth her chickens under her wings, but ye would not. Behold, your house is left unto you desolate, for I say unto you, ye shall not see Me henceforth, till ye shall say, 'Blessed be He that comes in the Name of the Lord' " (Matt. 23:37-39). And so it would be. Within forty years to the shock of the entire Jewish nation, the terrible diaspora would be completed, the disperson ushering in "the age of the gentiles." Christ's words would become true to the letter. "And when ye shall see Jerusalem compassed with armies, then know that the desolation thereof is nigh. And they shall fall by the edge of the sword and be led away captive unto all the nations; and Jerusalem shall be trodden down of the gentiles, until the times of the gentiles be fulfilled" (Luke 21: 20-24). Note that it would not be until 1967 that the Bible Jerusalem would be freed from alien rule for the first time in almost two thousand years.

Yet even now, in Israel, far across the earth from where we sat in India, prophecy upon prophecy was drawing unto completion. The age of the gentiles was reaching its end, the dispersion, likewise was ending as millions of Jews had poured back into their homeland since independence in 1948. As the apostle Paul, rabbi Saul of Tarsus, had said that even though God's judgement had come to Israel, and that God had turned to the gentiles because of the Jewish rejection of the Messiah, even then, this did not mean that the sons of Israel were cast away forever. God would honour his covenant of old, He had yet a salvation plan for the nation Israel, the original vine, the chosen race.

The present day regathering had been predicted in Deuteronomy, (30:1-3), Jeremiah, Ezekiel (36 : 24, 28), and Isaiah. In Isaiah, it is told, ;'And it shall come to pass in that day, that the Lord shall set his hand again the second time to recover the remnant of his people, which shall be left, from Assyria and from Egypt, and from Pathros, and from Cush, and from Elam, and from Shina, and from Hamath, and from the islands of the sea. And he shall set up a sign for the nations, and shall assemble the outcasts of Israel, and gather together the dispersed of Judah from the four corners of the earth." (Isaiah 11: 11-12.)

The humbling salvation that would come to the reassembled nation of Israel would be the realization that the One whom they had rejected, Christ, was the Messiah. And that the mistake made by their ancestors was the failure to see the two distinct Messianic advents in Old Testament prophecy: truly, the same Massiah, yet coming upon two occasions for two purposes. One as the Lord of Glory, the other as the suffering servant predicted in Isaiah and the Psalms. The Jews in Christ's time expected the Christ of the Second Coming, the Logos at the consummation of the ages, not God's Lamb, not the lowly king riding upon an ass of whom it is said, "Rejoice greatly, O daughter of Zion! Shout in triumph, O daughter of Jerusalem! Behold, your king is coming to you; He is just and endowed with salvation, humble, and mounted on a donkey, even on a colt, the foal of a donkey." (Zechariah 9:9.)

The suffering Messiah had been in Isaiah all along;

"He is despised and rejected of men; a man of sorrows, and acquainted with grief; and we hid, as it were,.our faces from Him; He was despised, and we esteemed Him not.

"Surely He hath borne our griefs, and carried our sorrows; yet we did esteem him stricken, smitten of God and afflicted. But He was wounded for our transgressions, He was bruised for our iniquities, the chastisement of our peace was upon Him: and with his stripes we are healed. All we like sheep have gone astray; we have turned every one his own way, and the lord hath laid down upon him the iniquity of us all." (Isaiah 53:2-6.)

Yet like Isaiah, many centuries before Christ, and far before the times of today, Zechariah recorded a stunning prophecy of God that seems yet to be fulfilled, soon perhaps. Of the great sorrow that shall overwhelm the nation Israel when the Messiah is finally recognized.

"They shall look upon me whom they have pierced, and shall mourn for Him as one mourns for his only son . . . . In that day there shall be great mourning in Jerusalem . . . . All the families that are left, each with an overwhelming individual sorrow in having blindly rejected their unrecognized Messiah." (Zechariah 12:10, last two lines from the amplified version.)

"All the families that are left," would seem to describe a remnant of people following a tribulation Israel had yet to go through before Christ returned, this one "whom they had pierced."

For in the verses we have just looked at, Zechariah would record something most compelling. It would describe a Jerusalem following the regathering, once again compassed by armies. "And it shall come to pass in that day, that I will seek to destroy all the nations that come against Jerusalem. And I will pour upon the house of David, and upon the inhabitants of Jerusalem, the spirit of grace and of supplication; and they shall look upon me whom they have pierced . . . ." (Zechariah 12 : 9). Ezekiel 38:18-23 would clearly describe those making war upon Israel in those future days. When the country to one day become Russia, "Gog," would attempt to destroy Israel in league with other nations, heathen nations, who will have turned against Christ themselves.

It was incredible to consider that the national blocks of power mounting up this century were specifically predicted in the Bible. The present separate alignments of Russia and the UAR, China becoming a world power, the states of Europe forming into a block, and then another land far in the west to be yet another power. The revelation of St. John in the New Testament, two thousand years old, would be even more specific about all these details, even mentioning that China would have an army of two hundred million. (Doubtless medieval churchmen saw this as symbolic. Not so today.) Ultimately these heathen nations would surround Israel, to annihilate her, but the True Messiah, Christ, would intervene, the Bible said, at the crucial moment when all hope would appear utterly lost.

By this time the worldwide body of true Christians will have undergone extensive persecution. Likewise, the nation Israel, due to her long time blindness will again, in expecting her own concept of the Messiah, have been deceived into prematurely yoking with a false Messiah whose ultimate aim would be to destroy the remnant of Judah. (So far, more than forty false Messiahs have appeared in the Jewish nations.) This same person will be the anti-Christ of the Bible, the enemy of Christ, the final weapon of Satan against Christ's own and the world at large.

Israel's future salvation would be a most costly endeavour, but God would spare her remnant in the end, for God would never go back on his word. In the meantime, through the dispersion, Christ will have reached countless gentiles, thus fulfilling God's promise to Abraham that his seed would be a blessing to all the nations (Genesis 22 : 18). God's plan was perfect, but not without cost. First to Christ who paid a price no man can understand. For no mortal can dream of what it is like for the Logos of total perfection and holiness to bear the sin of the entire world, in the panorama of history, as the ransom sacrifice that animal sacrifices only foreshadowed, to the extent of becoming totally separated from the full communion of His God nature. David in Psalm 22 : would prophesy the very words of the Messiah at that point, "Eli, Eli, lama Sabachthani," My God, My God, why hast thou forsaken me?

But if it was not enough that Christ fulfilled 333 specific prophecies in the Old Testament, all written centuries before he was born, a chance of virtually one out of infinity, there was yet a rock of prophetic scripture in Daniel that would, forever, be a stumbling-block to every rabbi that ever lived and taught that Jesus Christ was not the Messiah. Naturally, many rabbis would water down the word of God to pure symbol and allegory, for they could not tolerate the implication. But for the orthodox Jew, there was a real problem. A teeth gnasher of a problem.

The Jewish elders at the time of Christ well knew it and so did a great portion of the common people. They were all waiting for Daniel's prophecy of the coming Messiah to come true. The Christ of Glory who would finally free Israel of Roman rule and make it the God's seat in the world. Abolishing pagan influence in the occupied land, the slavery of the sons of Zion, and the division of the land into states overseen by half-blood kings. They wanted physical vindication, they wanted to humble their oppressers and see the tables of power turned in their favour. Therefore this miracle-working character who talked so much on gentle love, this man of Galilee, so plain, so simple, was a intolerable disgrace to their dreams of a political king. They could not endure the one whom the Bible had predicted, "Behold your king is coming to you; He is just and endowed with salvation, humble, and mounted on a donkey." Indeed, most of the elders and men of influence would scornfully look away. Thus it could be said "The stone that the builders rejected has become the chief corner-stone." (Psalm 118:22.)

Rabbi Akiba, the Jewish leader of his day who scrapped the Septuagint, also knew the prophecy in Daniel. That is why he mistakenly followed a Jew named Simon, who claimed to be the "Scepter" of Israel and was named Bar-Kochba, as Israel's Messiah. And a great proportion of the Jews believed that Bar-

Kochba was the kingly Messiah, that is why the final Jewish stronghold perished at the battle of Massada under the army of Severus. They believed Bar-Kochba entirely and died, 80,000 soldiers and millions of people. Rabbi Akiba died eating his words. Bar-Kochba seemed their last hold out from embarrassment, for after his time, the period for Messiah's appearance would have ended. And even then, after 137 a.d., they were stretching it. For what they feared was that if Messiah did not come, the only one the world could look back to would be Jesus Christ, and that would be scandalour indeed.

But exactly why was the Jewish nation so fitfully looking for her Messiah in the year that the world calendars, whose entire time system is founded on the birth of Jesus Christ, place as Anno Domini, "the year of our Lord." or the year one?

Here is the astounding fact in Daniel (9: 24-27).

"Seventy weeks have been decreed for your people and your hold city, to finish the transgression, to make an end of sin, to make atonement for iniquity, to bring in everlasting righteousness, to seal up vision and prophecy, and to anoint the most holy place.

"So you are to know and discern that from the issuing of a decree to restore and rebuild Jerusalem until Messiah the Prince there will be seven weeks and sixty-two weeks; it will be built again, with plaza and moat, even in times of distress.

"Then after sixty-two weeks the Messiah will be cut off and have nothing, and the people of the Prince who is to come will destroy the city and the sanctuary. And its end will come with a flood; even to the end there will be war; desolations are determined.

"And he will make a firm covenant with many for one week, but in the middle of the week he will put a stop to sacrifices and grain offering; and the wing of abominations will come one who makes desolate, even until a complete destruction, one that is decreed, is poured out on the one who makes desolate."

This is absolutely what happened in history. The Messiah came, was "cut off" or killed, and then the temple was destroyed!

But what did God mean by sixty-nine and seventy weeks following the decree of the temple? It was quite simple and this was why the Jews at the time of Christ were looking for the Messiah. The Hebrew word for "week" is *shabua* and literally means a "seven." In Hebrew, the idea of seventy weeks is "seventy sevens" (the English concept of week does not apply to the meaning by Gabriel, carrying God's message). The Jews were familiar with a "seven" of both days and years. In the case of Daniel, there had been a discussion of years and multiples of seven earlier in the chapter (or, in other parts of the scripture, when Laban bargained with Jacob to give him his younger daughter Rachel, he said, "Fulfill her week, and we will give thee also for the services which thou shalt serve with me yet seven other years." (Gen. 29:27.) Those sixty-nine weeks, spoken of in the book of Daniel, were sixty-nine "sevens of years," or 69 times 7 years, times 360 days (a prophetic year). This would mean 173, 880 days following the decree of rebuilding Jerusalem.

Now, from the time of the Book of Daniel, when would Jerusalem be restored? In Isaiah (44: 28) it begins to approximate it, saying: "That saith of Cyrus, He is my shepherd, and shall perform all my pleasure; even saying to Jerusalem, thou shalt be built; and to the temple, thy foundation shall be laid." This would be during the time of the Medeo-Persian empire following the conquest of Babylon. It seems likely that the one who carried the order out, however, was Artaxerxes. In Nehemiah (2: 1-8), the date is given;" In the month of Nisan (March) in the twentieth year of Artaxerxes the King . . . . And I said to the king, 'If it pleases the king, and if your servant has found favour before you, send me (the prophet) to Judah, to the city of my father's tombs, that I may rebuild it."

It is a fact of history that Artaxerxes accession was in 465. Therefore the period just given in Nehemiah was twenty years closer to a.d., 445 years before Christ. (It took forty-nine years to restore the city, V.25 plus the close of the Hebrew prophecy and the Old Testament canon in Malachi is noteworthy, marked forty-nine years after 445 b.c.)

The exact date of his final public advent, the triumphal entry into Jerusalem, just before he was "cut off," according to many calculations of Sir Robert Anderson in, *The Coming Prince* (p. 127), was 6 April, 32 a.d. He states, "The Julian date of the 10th Nisan was Sunday the 6 April, a.d. 32. What then was the length of the period intervening between the issuing of the decree to rebuild Jerusalem and the public advent of 'Messiah the Prince'?—Between the 14 April b.c. 445, and the 6 April a.d. 32? the interval contained exactly and to the very day *173,* *880 days*, or seven times sixty-nine prophetic years of 360 days, the first sixty-nine weeks of Gabriel's prophecy," in the Book of Daniel!! By the seventieth week, the army of Titus would destory the temple such that not a single stone would be standing, as Christ himself would prophecy (A fire would cause the gold in the sanctuary to melt through the seams in the huge stones, causing the Roman army to uproot them in search would of the gold).

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